

## Episode Fifteen: Abyss

By Tree

*Stop, drop and roll? That was it wasn't it? No, that's what you do when you're on fire, any second-grader knew that! Okay, maybe it was "jump, tuck and then roll?" Hmm? Was there a recommended way to launch oneself from one rooftop to another and land correctly? Must've missed that chapter in "How to be a Hunter!"*

Dean barely stifled a grunt as he dropped the five feet gap from the lowest rung of the fire escape to the ground. The jolt of the landing sent a wave of pain through his right shoulder and swept across his chest despite Sam's hands placed on either side of his waist to steady him. The sudden gulp of air did not go unnoticed by the younger hunter either as Sam watched Dean protectively draw his injured arm in towards his body.

Sam could read Dean's body language as easily as he had his textbooks at Stanford. Although he hadn't seen his brother's landing on the asphalt-covered rooftop, he had seen the aftermath of it. He recognized the stoicism that accompanied pain, the tense set of the jaw when his brother was attempting to restrain an audible groan, the rigid carriage of his body when he was trying to act as though everything was alright. After all the time they had spent on the road together and the countless injuries, Sam could tell when Dean was hurt and Dean was definitely hurt right now.

"You gonna let me look at that arm?" he finally asked as they moved slowly between the line of row houses that were so common to the city of York, Pennsylvania.

Dean never stopped, his head tilted down, eyes tracking his feet as he slowly plodded forward. Yet another sign to Sam that his brother was on autopilot.

"Dean?"

"Later Sam!" his brother refused, looking up finally as they approached the waiting Impala.

For the briefest moment the siblings' eyes met and despite the shadows cast by the sodium vapor streetlights, Sam could see the taut lines of stress on Dean's forehead, the perspiration that clung to his brow. The hollow look that stared back out at the younger hunter belied the physical pain underneath.

"Now DEAN!" Sam insisted. He wasn't about to ignore the signs any longer, no matter how much his brother protested.

"Dude, lay off me! It's just bruised. It'll be fine in the morning."

"Dean, you're sweating like you've been laying in a sauna and I haven't seen you move that arm since we lost track of the creature."

Exasperated at Sam's never-ending smothering concern, Dean fumed as he tried to fish the keys to the car out of his right pants pocket. Every miniscule movement was pure agony in his shoulder, yet his hand actually felt numb and thick, detached from the rest of the appendage. Try as he might, he couldn't force his fingers to grasp the metal of the keys. A strange dichotomy, it was like his hand was stuck in a bucket of ice while his shoulder was being bathed in acid. Switching over, he dug into the denim with his opposite hand, another move that did not go unobserved by Sam. Glancing up as he caught the dark knowing eyes of his brother piercing through his well-crafted exterior, Dean did his best to glare back.

"Dude, we just spent the better part of the night chasing a friggin' stone gargoyle around the rooftops of York. Well, ok, the thing isn't exactly stone anymore, but the point is, I'm tired, I'm hot and I really just want to go back to the room, get a shower, maybe a cold beer and do my very best to forget about today."

Dean moved to the trunk and inserted the key with his left hand trying to hide the awkwardness of the movement. Sam noticed, but he knew that any comment he might make would just be turned against him and filled with his brother's irritated

denial. As he watched Dean fuss about the trunk replacing weapons, his right arm hanging limply at his side, Sam quickly plotted his next action.

“Okay bro, whatever you want. I’ll even spring for the first round.”

Moving up behind his brother, Sam drew back his hand and with an open-palm, slapped Dean on the back of his right shoulder. The older sibling’s reaction was immediate. Dean sunk to his knees on the pavement, the string of obscenities pouring from his mouth broken only by the gasps of air he sucked in to combat the excruciating pain that was washing over him. Dean gripped the Impala’s rear bumper with his left hand, struggling to gather the energy to rise to his feet, if for no other reason than to make a valiant effort to beat the smug look off his baby brother’s face. Unable to muster the power to stand, he instead chose to focus his effort in a verbal assault.

“What the hell, Sam! Why the hell did you do that? Are you freakin’ insane, you bastard?”

The smile faded from Sam’s face as he realized the full extent of his brother’s injury. From his higher vantage, towering over his kneeling brother, he could now see the sudden slope of Dean’s right shoulder. Drooping significantly lower than the left and jutting forward, Sam was sure that it was dislocated. In that moment, he knew why Dean had been reluctant to move the limb; chances were he couldn’t have moved it even had his life depended on it.

Reaching down, gently placing one hand under Dean’s left arm and the other gripping the belt loop on his jeans, Sam pulled his brother to his feet, maintaining his hold until he was sure Dean was steady. Breathless and angry, Dean pushed away from Sam with his left hand, slumping back against the car, eyes still wide and staring in disbelief at his brother.

“Dean, your shoulder is dislocated,” Sam stated matter-of-factly.

“Dude, it was fine until you decided to punch me with that friggin’ big paw of yours! I am so gonna owe you for that. You just wait. When you least expect it, I’m gonna ...”

“Shut up Dean!” Sam interrupted sternly. “I’m tired of playing this game with you all the time. Why do you have to be such a stubborn ass? It’s total bullshit and it just wastes time.”

Caught completely off guard by his brother’s blatant tirade, Dean could do no more than stand with his mouth open, his anger at Sam halted mid-sentence. Before he had a chance to regroup, Sam determinedly moved forward and began peeling off Dean’s outer shirt. Once unbuttoned, he pulled the thin layer off the damaged shoulder eliciting an audible groan from his sibling. Sam halted briefly as he considered the next layer of T-shirt. Without a second thought, he pulled the pocket knife from his jeans and in a single fluid motion, he flipped it open with his thumb and slipped it under the sleeve of the shirt.

Dean began to protest, but before the first syllable escaped his lips, the damage had been done. Sam continued his hasty alteration until he had cut the shirt from the injured arm. Once removed, the obvious deformity to the shoulder caused Sam to take a deep breath. The round cap of the joint was now pushed forward in front of Dean’s collarbone. Even the appearance of his musculature looked painful and distorted.

“Dean, it’s dislocated, if not worse!” Sam announced. “I can’t fix this!”

“Dude, I’m gonna kick your ass for cutting up my t-shirt. Not to mention, what I’m gonna do to you for hitting me. That’s two I owe you for,” he countered, a thinly veiled attempt to deflect the conversation from its inevitable direction.

His turn to be exasperated, Sam slowly shook his head. Dean could be such a jackass when it came to admitting any vulnerability and while Sam had come to rely on his brother’s stalwart determination during a hunt, times like this made him want to shake Dean until his head rattled.

“Okay! Are you done now?” he began. “Now listen to me, we are going to the hospital; you’re gonna get that shoulder fixed and the only thing I want to hear come out of your mouth is “Yes Sam.” You got it?”

Stunned by the sudden commanding tone coming out of his brother, Dean paused then slowly nodded. Although he wouldn’t admit it, deep down he knew Sam was right. In fact, despite his earlier insistence that the arm was merely bruised, the more time that passed, the less he could feel his lower arm. By now, everything south of his elbow was heavy and numb. He was pretty certain that the current lack of pain was not necessarily a good sign.

As if reading his thoughts, Sam reached down to touch Dean’s listless hand. The cold radiating from the extremity shocked him and he retracted his touch as if he had been bitten by a snake.

“Holy crap, Dean! Your hand is freezing. Can you move your fingers at all?” he asked.

“No,” came the soft reply. “I can’t feel them or my hand anymore either,” he admitted, reaching over to protectively draw in the injured arm to his body once more.

His charade completely unmasked, defeat evident in his pain-filled eyes, Dean looked up at Sam. He reluctantly held out his left hand, sullenly offering the Impala’s keys.

“You win, let’s go.” Rare acquiescence in those four words, his brother submitting, Sam suddenly felt like he hadn’t really won at all.

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For an early summer Friday night, the Emergency Department of York County Hospital was surprisingly quiet. Upon their arrival, the staff quickly sprung into action, seemingly eager to finally have a patient to tend to. Although not a life or death crisis, Sam was shocked at the response and attention that was being paid to Dean. In a relatively short period of time, Dean had been examined, x-rayed and returned to the treatment room, his face even more haggard from the radiologist’s positioning of his injured arm for the films. More than once, Sam had heard a familiar string of curse words as he hovered outside the x-ray department doors.

As he sat next to Dean now, Sam could feel the exhaustion slowly begin to creep into his own body. It was nearly two in the morning and this had been the third straight night that they had spent the better majority of the dark hours patrolling the skyline of the old city. Not usually one to need much sleep, worry over his brother combined with the let down of adrenaline from finally seeing and chasing the creature across the rooftops and Sam was now feeling the beckoning call to close his eyes.

Dean had said little since arriving at the hospital which Sam chalked up to part pain and part anger directed at him. Tired of the silent treatment and desperate to stay awake, he attempted to break Dean’s icy wall with talk about the hunt.

“So, what do you think we should do next?” he asked, hoping the phrasing of the question might feed his brother’s need to be in charge.

Dean grumbled something first, but then recognized the apologetic look on Sam’s face and he knew he couldn’t remain angry at his brother any longer.

“I dunno, dude. S’pose we need to see how this turns out first,” he replied, motioning with his head toward the right arm that lay limply at his side.

“You know, I was thinking, Dean. Some of the lore about gargoyles says that they’re only animated at night. Maybe we have been approaching this all wrong. Maybe we should be scoping out the architecture around town during the day when the thing is solid stone,” Sam suggested.

“Yeah Sam, that would make sense if every freakin’ rooftop in this town wasn’t sporting the damn things. These people must’ve had some serious issues with warding off evil back in the day. Problem is my geeky brother, that there is also lore

that says gargoyles can become animated continuously with the right spellwork, so we don't know that this thing isn't out there roaming around twenty-four seven."

"Besides," the older hunter continued, "did you get a good look at that thing? 'Cause I sure didn't and I hate to break it to you, but the damn things all look the same to me. I don't suppose the good people of York will sit by and watch us take a sledgehammer to all of their statues?"

"Excuse me?" a voice interrupted, startling both Winchester boys as they looked up at the white-coated physician that had just entered the room. "What would you be planning on smashing?" he asked apprehensively.

Sam stammered, not sure how much of their conversation the doctor had heard. "Oh, nothing like that. My brother here doesn't appreciate art in any form. He was just voicing his rather strong, but uneducated opinion, on some of the local statuary."

The young physician seemed appeased with that answer and his expression changed from suspicion to concern as he stepped further into the room, closing in on the gurney where Dean lay.

"Let's start with introductions. My name is Dr. Ebersol, I'm the ER resident tonight," he said, offering out his hand to both Dean and then in turn to Sam.

"How's his shoulder doc?" Sam asked excitedly, earning a glare from Dean who once again did not appreciate his younger brother's incessant need to mother-hen him.

"Well, as I'm sure you're aware, that shoulder is most definitely dislocated. The good news is that we can probably reduce it without much problem, but we need to do it pretty quick. From your earlier exam, it would appear that the dislocation has impinged on the nerve bundle in your upper arm. That's why your hand and fingers are cold and numb. Once we get the shoulder back into anatomical position, feeling and circulation should return."

"And after that?" Sam intervened again, voicing the question that he knew Dean was reluctant to ask. "Will there be any lasting problems?"

"I wouldn't think so," the young physician continued. "He'll have to keep it immobilized for a while, but most dislocations heal very nicely. Of course, we'll know better as it heals if there is any significant ligament or tendon injury, but I wouldn't expect any permanent damage."

"Well let's get on with it doc," Dean chirped in, preferring to direct the conversation away from any discussion about "permanent damage." "Sooner you fix it, the sooner I can get outta here!"

"Not one for hospitals huh?" Ebersol asked.

Dean smirked, "Let's just say that I've had my fill of them over the years."

"Well, unfortunately, I'm not the orthopedist. That would be Dr. Blane. He should be here within forty-five minutes and then we'll get it taken care of. In the meantime, this can be pretty uncomfortable so I'm going to order a hundred milligrams of Demerol to help reduce the pain and take the edge off when we do the procedure. Okay?" Ebersol informed him.

Dean looked suspicious, but he'd been down this road once before with a dislocated finger. If putting his shoulder back in place was proportional to the finger, he was game for whatever drug the doctor wanted to push. He nodded in agreement and Ebersol scribbled something onto the chart and left the room.

"I'm so proud of you," Sam teased, ruffling the short strands of his brother's hair. "What a big boy you're being."

Dean attempted to retaliate by reaching over to slap at Sam's silly grin, but the movement sent a wave of pain throughout his upper body and he sank back onto the stretcher, an audible groan escaping his mouth, his eyes crimped tightly closed. The humor deflated, Sam felt instantly guilty.

"Dean, I'm sorry! Look, it's just that you can be such a stubborn pain in the ass sometimes about being hurt. Well, actually, you can be a stubborn pain in the ass

about nearly everything, but dude, I just worry, okay?" Sam rambled, the seriousness in his eyes complimenting the concern in his voice.

"Yeah, whatever, just don't go all Erika Kane on me alright. No tearful hospital death scenes okay?" Dean replied, eyes rolling at the sincerity in his brother's face.

Sam contemplated a well placed slap to Dean's head when an older woman in scrubs entered the room. She held a small tray of supplies which she placed on the Mayo stand beside the stretcher. As the two young hunters watched, the nurse methodically assembled tubing and finished by inserting it into a large bag of IV fluid. Without a word, she grabbed Dean's left arm and began prepping an area on the top of his hand. Alarmed and less than happy about her cold demeanor, Dean yanked his hand away, throwing the woman the nastiest "oh no you don't" glare he could currently muster.

"Now sir," she began, "We have to get this IV in place so that we can get our pain medication."

"We?" Dean shouted, his patience already worn thin. "I don't think I have a squirrel under the sheet here with me! I thought this was gonna be just a quick shot or something."

"No sir, doctor has ordered an IV started in case something goes wrong during the procedure and we need to administer anything else."

"Goes wrong?" Hazel eyes flashed in alarm. "What the hell are you planning on going wrong?"

"I'm sure that nothing will go wrong sir, it's only a precaution. Now you just take it easy and I'll be done in a flash. It's just a little stick," the woman continued, brandishing the needle.

"Just a little stick she says, nothing can go wrong she says. Everybody's so friggin' optimistic around here," Dean mumbled.

The nurse smiled knowingly as she proceeded and for his part, Sam could barely stifle a snicker at his brother's sudden panic. The man could hunt every conceivable horrific thing from the pits of hell, but get him anywhere near a hospital and he freaked every time.

Sam continued to watch as the needle was buried under the skin of Dean's left hand and the clear tubing was connected. After checking to see that the fluid was dripping, the nurse then produced another syringe and needle, this one smaller and filled with liquid. His brother's eyes widened for a moment, but as the woman inserted it into the plastic hub attached to the tubing and began to slowly depress the plunger, a look of relief spread across Dean's face and his body visibly relaxed.

"That was the Demerol," the nurse announced. "You should be feeling it pretty quick this way. I'll check back with you in a few minutes and see how your pain is doing."

Finishing by taping the catheter and tubing down against his hand and forearm, she gathered her tray and casually strode from the room. Before she was even out of the door, a feeling of warmth had spread up Dean's arm and was washing over his chest and abdomen. His vision blurred for a brief moment and the noises of the emergency department distorted in his ears. Dean shook his head, clearing both his sight and hearing. The warmth had blanketed his entire body and his limbs now felt suddenly heavy.

"Saaammy!" he slurred, his head lolling as he tried to focus on the blue-green eyes nearly hidden under the mop of brown hair. "Whaddahell they gimmmmee?"

Sam laughed easily. There were few things currently funnier in his world than a stoned brother. He watched as Dean's movements became sluggish and uncoordinated and for a moment he worried that perhaps the dose of the narcotic had been a little too high.

"Just relax Dean. How's your shoulder feeling now?"

"Shoulder? Um, feels fine. Everything feels fine," the older man answered in a sing-song voice.

Dean suddenly shifted forward, his attention grabbed by something just beyond the open door. Sam watched as Dean feebly tried to sit up, becoming concerned as a look of fear spread across his brother's face.

"Dean, what is it?" Sam asked, his own heart picking up a beat in response to Dean's obvious increased concern.

"Sam, it found us!" Dean replied, tossing aside the thin blanket from across his legs.

The younger man strained to see whatever had captured his older sibling's attention, but only the normal scurrying of hospital staff filled the exterior hallway. He looked back at Dean, but his brother was still intent on something beyond the doorway.

"What is it Dean? What do you see?" Sam asked again, standing and moving closer to the door, trying to follow his brother's gaze.

"Sammy, don't you see it? Right there! The friggin' gargoyle! It followed us here!"

Sam moved to the doorjamb. Looking out into the rest of the emergency room, he saw nothing but the usual activity and knew instantly that the medication was responsible for Dean's current hallucinations.

"Dean, there's nothing out there. It's the pain meds. You just think you're seeing gargoyles, but it's only the hospital staff."

"No! No, it's right there dude! Sammy, be careful. It might see you! Where's my .45?" he yelled, struggling to swing his legs off the side of the stretcher but hampered by the metal rails that had been raised on either side of the bed.

Sam recognized the mounting stress in his brother's face and voice and while Dean's present mental status was more than humorous, he knew that he needed to get Dean out of hunter mode before he destroyed the ER and likely hurt himself further.

"Dean, it's okay! It's the medication they gave you. It isn't real. There's nothing there," he soothed, his hand resting lightly on his brother's left shoulder as he gently pushed him back down onto the gurney.

Hearing the raised voices, both Dr. Ebersol and the older nurse hurried into the room. Their presence only incensed the delusional hunter more and he lashed out with his uninjured arm in an attempt to repel whatever monstrous visage his drug induced mind was causing him to see.

"Sammy! Run! Get out of here!" he shouted. "What the hell is happening?"

"Dean, you have to calm down!" Sam insisted, still trying to calm his panicked brother as Dean struggled even more to escape the confines of the stretcher.

"Sam, don't you see them?" Dean pleaded. "There's a werewolf right there," he insisted, finger pointed at the shocked physician. "And she has fangs! I knew it, a freaking vampire!"

"Dean, it's the medication. You're seeing things, it's just the doctor and nurse," Sam stressed. But his brother would have nothing of it as he recoiled further against the mattress.

Stunned by the ranting of the previously stoic patient, the young resident moved to the bedside in a textbook attempt to calm the injured man.

"Mr. Hammett, uh, Dean is it? Look, some patients have adverse reactions to pain medications, but what you're experiencing is not real. Okay?" Ebersol stated "You need to calm down before you injure yourself further!"

As the doctor's hand came in contact with his arm, Dean could feel the sharp talons of the werewolf close in on the skin of his wrist. He could see the saliva dripping from the gaping maw of the creature as it leaned in closer to tear out his throat. Survival instincts accompanied by fear caused him to shout out, his voice echoing throughout the small space as he swung a closed fist that connected with the physician's jaw. Ebersol fell backwards, knocking over a nearby stand as he landed on the floor rubbing the side of his face. Turning to Sam, he saw the

uncertainty in the young man's expression as his patient continued to yell about demons and ghosts and assorted other creatures.

Recovering, the young resident pulled himself up slowly, avoiding the side of the stretcher and the still ranting young man. Drawing Sam to the doorway he spoke in a low tone as Dean rambled on.

"I don't have to tell you that this is a pretty strange reaction to the Demerol," Ebersol began. "I mean, I've seen people think the room is moving or that there are strange noises or lights, but your brother thinks he see monsters everywhere. Has he ever had any 'other' medical problems in the past?"

Sam paused for a moment, contemplating the tone of the doctor's question and his emphasis on the word "other."

"Are you asking me if my brother has mental health issues?" he voiced defiantly. *Does my brother have mental health issues? Well, let's see. He saw his mother pinned to a ceiling and burst into flames when he was just four. He was raised by a man that spent more time teaching him to shoot a gun than to shoot hoops. He's spent his entire life hunting and killing things that would make you piss your pants.* "No, I wouldn't say that he has any mental problems," Sam continued, but as his brother raged on about evil spirits and rock salt-loaded shotguns, he felt certain that the doctor wasn't buying it.

Sighing deeply, Ebersol cast a glance at the delusional young man on the stretcher. Although he was in his third year of ER residency, he had yet to see such a peculiar reaction to a medication. Sure, patients often saw things while under the influence of narcotics, but none he had ever encountered had been so graphic and vehement about their visions. The little voice in the back of his head told him that there was much more to this patient than an adverse reaction. Delusions such as these were much more deeply rooted in the psyche.

"Alright, Dr. Blane should be here shortly. I'm going to order a sedative so that your brother doesn't injure that shoulder any further and so we can reduce that dislocation once the orthopedist arrives. We'll see how he's doing once he calms down. You seem to be the only person he doesn't think is straight out of a horror movie, so perhaps you should stay with him until we get him under control. But I have to tell you, I am seriously considering a psych consult for him if this behavior continues."

Sam nodded warily and returned to his brother's bedside. Dean was nearly out of control when the nurse returned to the room with yet another syringe in her hand. Sam could only imagine what his brother's delusional mind must have been seeing as the older woman came at him with the threatening-looking thing in her hand. He tried to calm Dean and even went so far as to restrain his uninjured left arm as the nurse injected the medication into the IV port.

As quickly as the narcotic had hit his system, so did the sedative and within a few ticks of the large wall clock, Dean's eyes fluttered and his body relaxed once again. Sam let go with a breath of relief and returned to his abandoned seat beside the stretcher.

A few blessedly quiet minutes passed before Dean looked over at him through heavily-lidded eyes, the wild panic of earlier replaced by glassy incoherence.

"Did you get 'em?" he asked thickly. "Did you kill the werewolf?"

"Yeah Dean! I got all of them for you!" Sam replied.

"Good. Thanks bro." Dean slurred, his voice a whisper as his eyes met Sam's. Despite the dull, nearly fully dilated pupils that stared back at him, Dean's eyes held an innocent, sincere quality that was generally reserved for those rare times that he let down his usually well fortified guard. Sam smiled, reaching out to gently touch his brother's injured arm.

"It's gonna be okay. Why don't you just rest and wait for the doc to come and take care of that shoulder. I'll stand watch, alright?"

There was a brief look of panic as Dean tried to boost himself up in bed, struggled to become more alert, refusing to succumb to the sedating effects of the medication. Even in his less than coherent state, the basic need to watch out for and protect his younger brother overrode all else.

In the end, his body lost the fight against the drugs and for the second time that night he acquiesced. "Okay Sam. But wake me up when it's my turn. And watch out for that big granite sonofabitch," he reminded, then quickly added, "and that damn vampire too."

Sam nodded, trying to hide the slight smile as Dean's eyes drifted closed. On one level, he wasn't surprised that, given the medication, Dean's subconscious had turned to the one topic that was nearly always on the top of his mind. Yet, on another level, Sam was worried, had always been worried, that his brother's near obsession with hunting, mirroring their father's, might sooner or later lead to something like this.

As exhausted as he was, Sam stayed awake, standing watch as he promised, although it was watching Dean and not for gargoyles. It was over an hour and a half and not the forty-five minutes that Ebersol had promised before the orthopedist arrived. Dean mostly dozed the entire time, waking occasionally, still looking for creatures, still groaning if he moved the wrong way on his shoulder.

They ushered Sam from the room when Dr. Blane arrived, the ortho looking less than pleased about being called at such an early morning hour. There was no mistaking when they woke Dean up, the sedative not able to tame either the delusional rant or the string of crude epithets that the doctor's examination of the injured shoulder caused.

In the end, they called Sam back into the treatment room, essentially begging his assistance in dealing with his less than cooperative sibling. Fortunately for all those involved, Dr. Blane was as good as Ebersol had promised and the reduction of Dean's shoulder went smoothly once they sedated him once again and with Sam basically promising that his brother wasn't nearly as crazy as he was currently sounding.

With Dean quiet once more, the doctors finished with his shoulder, x-rayed it again and then, satisfied that it was in place, Ace-wrapped it to his chest to splint it in place.

Sam waited outside the doorway again, not intending on eavesdropping, but doing so none-the-less.

"So, have you ever seen behavior like this before?" Ebersol asked, helping the orthopedist to wrap the last piece of elastic bandage around an unconscious Dean's chest.

The older physician looked at the young resident wistfully as he held traction on the injured extremity. "Had this old woman once, post-surgically, that gave me a black eye. Thought I was some old boyfriend from way back that had cheated on her with her best friend. Popped me good I'll tell ya."

"Yeah, but demons and vampires and werewolves?"

"So? The kid watches too many horror flicks? Big deal. Could be worse. Not like he's amp'd up on crack or something like half the kids I took care of when I did my ortho residency in Baltimore."

Ebersol looked less than certain, still concerned that his patient's behavior had been more than just the overactive imagination of a horror show junkie. In this day and age of lawsuits being levied against doctors at the drop of a hat, he was worried about turning someone loose that so obviously needed help in the mental health department.

"Look, if you're so worried, keep the kid here for observation tonight. It sure won't hurt to see how that shoulder looks in the daylight before we cut him loose and you could see how he is once all the Demerol was washed out of his system. If he comes up lucid, then you can write it all off to just a bad med reaction and tell the poor fool to make sure no one ever gives it to him again," Blane advised.

Ebersol nodded. Keeping Mr. Hammett for the remainder of the shift under the guise of “observation” would give him plenty of time to call in a psych consult. At least then he could say he covered his ass if the case came up during Grand Rounds.

Outside the room, Sam listened to the two doctors' conversation. At first, he was indignant on Dean's behalf, insulted at the implication that his brother could be crazy or on drugs. If either of these men even had an inkling of the things Dean had seen or the creatures that he had destroyed, they'd be kissing his ass. They should be thankful that there were people like his brother out there willing to put their own lives on the line so that others like themselves could continue to live oblivious to the many horrors that roamed the earth.

Still, there was one upside to all this. If the doc wanted to keep Dean for observation overnight, that certainly could work out to Sam's benefit. Not that having Dean hurt and in a hospital was something that he preferred, but he knew his brother all too well. As soon as Dean was free of the hospital, he was sure to insist on jumping right back into the hunt, injured shoulder be damned. At least with Dean stuck in here for a day, Sam knew he might be able to get a line on the gargoyle before his brother had a chance to get out and be an annoying pain in the ass about the shoulder; in other words, to be typical Dean.

Sam became alert when Ebersol and Blane walked out of the treatment room. Dr. Blane approached him first, the silver-haired specialist smiled genuinely as he shook Sam's hand, his earlier irritation at having been called in seemingly having abated.

“Your brother's shoulder reduced quite well. I don't see any reason to suspect any lasting problems, but we'll see how he moves it tomorrow. I'll be back in doing rounds in the afternoon and I'll take a look then. For now, we've basically splinted it to his chest. The first several days are the most important, that's when it's the weakest and most susceptible to dislocating again. Over time, it'll strengthen and be just fine,” he explained.

Ebersol spoke next, continuing as soon as the orthopedist finished. “Dr. Blane suggested, and I concur, that it would be in your brother's best interest to stay here for observation. Again, as he said, so that we can check his shoulder again later. Plus, as I mentioned before, his reaction to the medication was uh, pretty abnormal. This will give it a chance to get completely out of his system and we can be sure that he's, well, back to normal.”

“Yeah, sure, that makes sense,” Sam readily agreed. In his mind, he could already feel the lumpy motel bed beckoning him, thinking to himself what a pleasure it would be to go back and sleep peacefully, wake leisurely, and shower without Dean pounding on the door to speed him up.

“Alright then, I'll take care of the orders and we'll get him sent upstairs as soon as they have a room assigned. You can hang out if you want to, but he seems to be sleeping now... thank God,” Ebersol mumbled the last bit.

“Nah, to be honest, it's been a long night and I don't want to wake him up. I'll just pop in and check on him and then take off. I'll check in tomorrow and see how he's doing,” Sam replied.

“Well, I do my rounds right after lunch. He should be ready to go after then,” Blane suggested, shaking Sam's hand one final time before walking down the corridor.

Ebersol nodded at the young hunter as well and trailed the older doctor down the hallway, jotting notes on Dean's chart as he walked away. Sam watched him go, still slightly irritated at the physician's somewhat callous bedside manner, but too tired to challenge him.

He turned in to the doorway to the exam room, leaning against the jamb and pausing briefly to watch Dean in the dim lighting. His brother lay there peacefully sleeping, a blanket pulled up to his waist, his chest bare except for the lengths of beige Ace-wrap that held his right arm snugly against his ribs. A stark contrast to the man that had not long before been wanting to wage all-out war on the denizens of

evil right there in the emergency room, Dean now looked more calm than Sam could ever remember seeing him before.

Sam moved quietly over to the side of the stretcher. He bent over, his face nearing the raised head of the bed. Dean groaned slightly, his body attempting to shift in the depths of slumber but the pain of movement halting even unconscious reflexes.

"Enjoy the sleep, bro. You deserve it. And when you wake up, don't be mad at me. Just kick back, enjoy the pretty nurses fussing all over you and I'll be around after lunch to pick you up," Sam whispered.

Sam stood up, turning to leave the room, when his eye caught on something shiny. Dean's silver ring, removed when the doctors had begun working on his shoulder, lay silently next to his destroyed shirt on the nearby stand. For a second, Sam considered taking the piece of jewelry with him for safekeeping. But then he considered that, knowing Dean, his brother would simply tear the hospital apart in search of the possession if he thought it lost or worse yet stolen.

Instead, Sam picked up the silver band and placed it gently in his brother's left palm, closing it tightly within Dean's hand. He watched Dean for a moment longer, then slipped silently out of the darkened room and into the outer hallway.

Sam was nearly to the ER entrance, the morning sunlight nearly blinding him when a blond-haired man in a short lab coat strode into his brother's room. The newcomer took up Sam's abandoned post at the side of the stretcher, a patient chart held loosely in his hand.

He quietly observed the sleeping man for several minutes, watching as the patient twitched in response to some sort of sleep-induced dream. Picking up the chart, he scanned through the documentation, stopping occasionally when he came across certain words that caught his eye. Looking back at the sleeping form, the doctor shook his head, a trickle of laughter escaping his thin lips.

"Hmmm, it says you need evaluated for a psych consult. You've been seeing vampires, werewolves, gargoyles and demons? Isn't it just too bad that people always want to jump to conclusions and label you crazy?"

Slowly, the blond man walked around Dean's bedside, circling the stretcher like a shark circling a wounded seal. He stopped when he reached the opposite side, crouching down, so that his mouth was near to the young hunter's ear.

"Such a pity that they are so blind to the evil that surrounds them every day. Oh well, let's talk about you. I wonder what other nightmares you have stored up in that head for me. But, that's the joy of therapy. We have all the time in the world for me to find out," he sneered, licking his lips as his irises flashed over black.

\* \* \* \*

*He was running, his booted feet coming down on dry twigs and foliage, crunching loudly with each step, although he couldn't hear it over the raucous noise that seemed to surround him. To his left, he caught the briefest flash of movement, but it was gone when he tried to focus on it again. Not that he was surprised; this had been going on for the better part of the day; run this way, spot the creature, run that way, spot the creature again, run a different way. To say that he felt like they were being toyed with was putting it mildly. The creature was smart, shrewd, and as Sam had so eloquently pointed out, a near-perfect hunter. And they were prey. So they did what prey did best: they ran.*

*To his right, Haley pulled up by his side. Her dark hair clung to her face, perspiration mixing with dirt and several thin trickles of blood from where stray branches had reached out and nicked her as she tore through the Colorado forest. She leaned forward, the palms of her hands pressed into her knees as she breathed heavily.*

*"Where is it?" she asked between gasps.*

*"I don't know. Close. It hasn't given up," he answered, looking around warily.*

*Within seconds, Sam and Ben joined them in the clearing, both of them breathless and weary. Haley straightened and moved over to her brother, placing an arm about his shoulders in an effort to comfort him. In turn, Sam moved over to his brother, noticing how Dean was still carefully watching the surrounding tree line.*

*"What are we going to do, Dean?" he asked as he approached. "We'll never survive another night out here in the woods with that thing. It'll pick us off one by one. Hell, we'll be lucky to make it through the afternoon."*

*Dean started to reply, wanting to ask his brother if it looked as though he had been recently struck by divine lightning and given all the secrets to the universe, but instead, another burst of movement in the brush silenced him. The .45 came up in his hand immediately and he fanned the woods in front of him, searching for the beast even though he knew that there was little chance of actually spotting it.*

*He was about to relax when another of the creature's mimicked cries sounded out from behind the group. The foursome all spun toward the noise, Haley and Ben once again looking panicked, while Sam and Dean gathered them for yet another sprint through the forest.*

*They headed out again, as they had been doing since daybreak, since finding Roy's body. Running in a direction that Dean could only hope was the way out of the woods and back towards safety. But the more they ran, the more the wendigo harried them. Lightning fast, it was behind them one second and then in front of them the next.*

*There was no way they were going to escape it and deep down he knew it. In the end, they were all going to end up ripped to shreds, just like Roy. He failed them, failed them all, saw it in each of their eyes every time they looked at him, but Sam was the worst. Sam's eyes accused him for following those coordinates; Dad's coordinates. Dad wasn't here, had never been here, and Sam had been right. Dad had set them up and now they were all going to die.*

*Dean took Haley by the hand, pulling her along with him as he coaxed her to run just a little faster. Just a few yards behind them, Sam and Ben were trailing, the young kid just not able to keep up the pace. Dean glanced back just in time to see Ben stumble over a half-buried branch and go down hard. He saw Sam stop to help the dark-haired teen up to his feet, but he and Haley were moving too fast to stop and render any help themselves. Besides, Sam was smart, he could take care of the kid and catch up to them; they had to keep moving.*

*Haley rounded a large Douglas Fir, its trunk so huge that for a moment she disappeared from Dean's sight. He was about to call out to her to wait on him when Ben's scream tore through the forest. Dean halted immediately, pulling up short as the cry was followed by the howl of the wendigo. Haley was instantly back at his side, fear for her brother apparent in the wideness of her eyes and the lines creasing her forehead. She pushed to go past him, but Dean reached out and restrained her, quieting her as he listened intently for any further sounds.*

*The woodlands around them went silent, not a single noise broke through the midday calm; not a bird, not a cricket, not even the wind. Dean could feel his heart pounding in his chest, could hear Haley's ragged breathing next to him. He strained to pick up any sound of Sam or Ben, knowing that they should have caught up by now.*

*"Sammy! SAM!" he shouted. Haley joined him with a similar chorus of calls to her brother.*

*When there was still no response, Dean moved off in the direction that he'd last seen Sam and Ben. He couldn't have taken more than two steps, when Haley's scream spun him back around.*

*She couldn't have been more than a step behind him and he'd assumed that she was keeping up, but in that split second that he'd taken his eyes off of her the creature had sprung from the thick brush and grabbed her. Dean only caught a*

*fleeting glimpse of her blue-gray jacket and brown hair as she was whisked off at near-blinding speed into the dense forest, her screams echoing behind her.*

*His .45 in hand, Dean chased after the abducted young woman, firing blindly at the blur that dragged her into the thickening green cover. He knew he stood little chance of hitting, much less killing the creature. In all likelihood, he was at greater risk of wounding Haley. But in his mind, clouded with fear, anger and frustration, he rationalized that death by his hand was preferable to what awaited her as her screams began to fade into the distance.*

*When the weapon clicked empty, he stopped chasing, silence once again returning to Blackwater Ridge. Dean looked around, suddenly realizing that he had run further away from Sam in his haste to save Haley. Replacing the clip on the automatic, he turned back the way he came at a dead run, shouting out Sam's name as his feet tore through the thick underbrush.*

*He reached the clearing faster than he anticipated, relieved when he spotted the sleeve of Sam's brown Carhartt peeking out from around the edge of a pine.*

*"Sam!" he yelled, approaching the tree.*

*"Sammy!"*

*"Dammit, Sam," Dean called out, grabbing a piece of his brother's jacket as he approached. "You jackass, I've been screaming my lungs out. Where the hell have you been? That sonofabitch got Haley. Where's Ben? Did it get ..."*

*Dean's tirade stopped mid-sentence as his gentle tug on Sam's arm caused his brother to slump over limply towards the ground. He quickly dropped, catching Sam before he hit the forest floor.*

*"Sam, what's wro ..."* The words began, but were choked off as Dean stared in horror at the ragged wound across his brother's neck. Sam's lifeless eyes stared blankly skyward, his head lolling in Dean's arm as he began to rock back and forth.

*"Aw, Sammy, nooo," he wailed, hugging his brother's body close to his chest, feeling Sam's still-warm blood saturate his shirt but not caring.*

*They were all dead; Roy, Ben, Haley, and now Sam. He should have stopped them when he had the chance. He should have listened to Sam when his brother wanted to leave the woods the first night. His own stupid pride and blind trust in his father had gotten them all killed. So caught up in his own torment, Dean barely registered the wendigo's nearby growl.*

*Consumed by grief, Dean continued to rock his dead brother back and forth, one hand gently wiping away splattered blood that marred Sam's face. He vaguely noticed the creature enter the clearing, only glancing up as it snarled at him, before he returned his attention back to Sam.*

*The thing howled again, its distorted body flexing out nearly transparent, yet blood-stained appendages as it raged at the human that dared to ignore it. The wendigo moved closer, its claws still trailing bits of flesh while jagged, yellowed teeth appeared in a misshapen mouth that bore the traces of the creature's most recent meal. Still, Dean didn't budge.*

*Nearly on top of him, the wendigo's eyes glowed red in the dying afternoon sunlight. If the beast was in any way perplexed by the lack of fear or defense coming from the young hunter, it wasn't apparent as it closed in. Dean gently laid Sam down to the ground, being careful to hold his brother's head as though the slightest jolt would somehow awaken him from a much needed slumber. Once Dean was satisfied that Sam's body had been placed out of harm's way, he rose to his feet.*

*Face to face with the creature, so close now that its fetid breath assailed him, Dean stared blankly at the wendigo. It paused only for a moment before it lashed out at him, its claws striking his left shoulder and continuing down across his chest, flaying open his skin in deep gouges and dropping Dean down to one knee.*

*He held back every sound, biting down on his bottom lip. The pain he was feeling had nothing to do with the physical attack his body was enduring. The wendigo moved in further, this time its left arm catching Dean above his right hip, claws*

*impaling into his abdomen and ripping upwards, stopping only as they became entangled at the base of his ribcage.*

*Dean gasped as his mouth suddenly filled with blood and his vision began to fade. He fought to stay upright, glancing over to Sam's body just two feet away. The wendigo grabbed him, claws sinking into his shoulder as it pulled him to his feet and then beyond. It drew him close, as though it wanted to look at this prey that had stood so passively by while it shredded it to pieces.*

*With glazed eyes, Dean looked back. He knew it wouldn't be long now, a minute or two before he finally bled out. He just didn't care anymore. What more did he deserve? Sam was dead.*

*As the wendigo bent its head down toward Dean's neck, its sharp, canine-like teeth puncturing his skin, he looked one last time at his dead brother. With his final breath, Dean screamed out Sam's name to the surrounding Colorado mountains.*

The scream echoed in his head, pounding between his ears like a hammer. Dean flashed awake, eyes opening, closing, and opening again as he struggled for lucidity. During one of the opening/closing sequences, Dean realized that there was a bright light shining in his eyes. As his other senses reported in for duty, he became aware of words being spoken, a voice, male but not familiar.

The last tendrils of the nightmare clung to his mind like a spider's web, pulling at him as he struggled to come alert. He could still feel his heart racing and the rawness in his throat from screaming Sam's name. He remembered Colorado, remembered that he and Sam had been trying to track down their father, following the coordinates that Dean had found in John's journal. But it was the memories after that seemed off, twisted in a way only a nightmare could produce.

Everything had felt real, too real. But it wasn't, was it? No, Haley had lived, and so had Ben. They had rescued Tommy and all made it out alive, most definitely including Sam. Their dad had never set them up; he never would have done that.

Dean shifted, trying to push himself upright to see the face that was attached to the strange-sounding words that were still swarming around his head. The pain that struck his shoulder was as instantly crippling as had been the vicious claws of the nightmare wendigo when it tore through his flesh. But that made sense didn't it? He and Haley had been captured by the creature, dragged back to its cave and hung up like food in a larder.

That was it! He was still in the cavern, still hanging, still waiting for Sam to find the trail of Peanut M&M's and come save his ass. Where the hell was his brother? But the bright light was shining into his eyes again, and Dean was reasonably certain that wendigo didn't have penlights. Then there were more words; words he couldn't understand, in Latin, but not, more guttural. Where the hell was Sam? Could wendigo talk? Could someone please turn off that friggin' bright light?

Dean struggled up once more. Up? Wait, wasn't he hanging in the cave? Yet now it felt like he was lying flat on the worst motel mattress of his life. And what was that smell? Had Sam checked them into some really nasty flop house of a motel? No, he was in the cave, hanging, and the smell was the rotting corpses surrounding him and the stench of the creature.

Dean pulled against what he thought was the rope suspending him from the ceiling of the cave, his mind incorporating the pain of his damaged shoulder into the confused jumble of reality and dream-state. While he tried desperately to free himself from the wendigo's snare in his mind, his physical body writhed helplessly on the filthy bedding below him.

He chanced opening his eyes once more, relieved when the brain-melting light was absent, less than pleased when he found that his vision was basically one giant blur regardless. Dean still couldn't move his arms, but that somehow didn't panic him nearly as much as the hazy, unfamiliar face that hovered over him now.

Even more confused, caught between the memory, the nightmare, and the strange piece of reality that was occurring before him, Dean did the one thing that seemed true and reliable; he called out for his brother.

“Saaammmyy!”

The figure before him drifted closer still. Almost within view, Dean could make out a white coat with a name embroidered above the pocket. The figure leaned in, whispering something in that same strange language. Dean was about to question the stranger, ask him who he was, and ready to tell him to either speak in English or to shut the hell up. But before he had the chance to utter the first word of defiance, Dean felt a sharp stick in his neck and saw the white-coated figure withdraw an ominous-looking needle and syringe.

Dean thrashed about again, pain in his shoulder driving him back into the relative safety of his mind. As the injection caused the room around him to go dim, he closed his eyes and felt himself sucked back into the darkness of the wendigo's lair.

\* \* \* \*

Doctor Kurt Vogler lifted the empty syringe from the young man's neck, watching as his “patient's” eyes rolled back and finally slammed shut. He smiled, pleased with himself for having found such an excellent source of untapped mental fodder. Just in this first session, he'd already fed richly enough to be sated for several days.

Standing there, he looked down at the dark haired man lying before him. This one had been more difficult than usual. Falsifying discharge and transfer papers was always more risky than when the patients were truly crazy, but from what Vogler had read on the ER report, this was one he simply couldn't afford to pass up.

Still, at least he had managed to move the young man without much notice. It didn't hurt that he was so well known and respected at York Hospital. No one had questioned the transfer when he had ordered it, and no one had seemed to notice that the patient's name didn't match anyone currently admitted. Once he had Dean Hammett safely tucked away at Harrisburg under another name, no one would be the wiser.

Before him, the young man twisted on the sweat-stained mattress and groaned loudly. Vogler stepped forward, reaching down to check the straps across the chest of the straightjacket. He knew they were snug, knew there was no way the young man could get out of them, even if he hadn't had an injured shoulder to begin with. Still, there was nothing like adding a little discomfort to the mix. Pain always seemed to add just a little “flavor” to the meal. Giving the strap a sharp tug, Vogler smiled again as he watched the grimace splay across the unconscious man's face.

Vogler closed his eyes, his hand reaching down to touch the twitching form below him. He tilted his head back, savoring the sheer adrenaline that was rushing through the man, siphoning it off of him like a hungry animal. He hadn't planned on taking again so soon, but why pass up a good thing?

Outside the room, the sounds of other patients echoed throughout the hallways. Yelling, screaming, begging; audible responses to delusions, psychoses, and madness in general. Within the small drab cell, Vogler ignored all the external disturbances, his attention solely focused on the one “patient” before him.

Yes, there may have been others before this one, but to Vogler, none may ever have compared to the fertile ground of horrors and deep-seated fears that he'd found in this mind; the mind of a hunter.

\* \* \* \*

Early afternoon and the hazy sunshine warmed the interior of the Impala as Sam pulled into the motel parking lot. He rubbed wearily at his eyes, not having slept nearly enough before returning to search for the elusive gargoyle. Pulling the keys

from the ignition, he figured a quick shower might help refresh him before he went to pick up Dean from the hospital. Truth be told, he wouldn't be very surprised to open the motel room door and find his sure-to-be-pissed brother sitting on one of the beds, glaring at him.

Actually, Sam pretty much expected that as soon as Dean woke up, he would sign himself out, likely yelling, ranting and cursing, albeit more coherently than last night. Hell, Dean would be so angry at him, that he'd probably not even wait for Sam to pick him up, choosing instead to walk the short distance back to the room. So, it was a bit of a surprise when Sam swung open the door and found a quiet and empty room.

"Okay, so he's really pissed at me and decided not to come back here. Probably found a bar that's already open and decided on his own brand of self-medicating," Sam mused.

But in the back of his mind, the little voice that always warned when things were a tad off, was already whispering. Sam reached in his pocket for his cell. Maybe Dean had called and he had just missed it during his rooftop reconnaissance. Scanning through the menu, he saw that there weren't any missed calls.

"Jumping to conclusions," he mumbled to himself, shrugging. "Most likely, he found some hot nurse and is on his third or fourth sponge bath by now."

Sam dialed the hospital, asking to be connected to his brother's room when the woman's voice answered. She paused momentarily, only to return to the line and inform Sam that there wasn't any patient listed by that name. Perplexed, Sam tried one of their other aliases, although he was relatively certain he recalled which one Dean had used when they had registered in the Emergency Department last night.

Still, the answer was the same, no Dean Hammett, or Winchester or for that matter anyone even with Dean as a first name was currently listed as an in-patient. As Sam waited on the other end of the line, nervously chewing on the edge of one fingernail, the woman's voice finally returned.

"I've found him, Mr. Hammett. Your brother was discharged from the ER this morning just before seven," she announced.

"Discharged?" Sam repeated. "Seven this morning? I left him just after five and they were moving him upstairs. How could he have been discharged at seven?"

"I don't know sir. I can only tell you what it says in the computer," she answered.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Thanks," he mumbled quickly before disconnecting the call.

Frustrated, Sam tossed the phone onto the nearest bed, dropping onto the worn floral spread right behind it. He ran a sweaty hand through an equally sweaty mop of hair, his earlier plan to shower now forgotten in the worry over Dean.

He just couldn't see his brother managing to make his way from the hospital just two short hours after Sam had left him in a heavily medicated state. Not to mention, that no matter how angry Dean would have been, eventually, he would have shown up back at the motel if for no other reason than to have showered and changed himself. Jumping up from the bed, Sam darted over to the dark duffel that lay at the end of the opposite bed.

It was still in the same position as Dean had left it the night before. A quick look inside didn't reveal that anything was missing or changed. He quickly canvassed the room, but like the bag, it appeared as unchanged as when he'd left it earlier.

Even more worried, Sam grabbed his cell and the keys from the bed and headed for the car. He wasn't even sure where to start other than the last place he'd seen Dean.

As he pulled the motel room door closed behind him, part of him hoped that maybe the lady at the hospital had been wrong. Maybe he'd get there and find Dean propped up in bed, ready to rip him a new one. At this point, even if he knew that Dean was shackled up with some candy striper, he would have breathed a sigh of relief. But as the Impala roared to life, that nagging voice beckoned again at the back of Sam's mind, reminding him that things were never that simple when it involved a Winchester.

\* \* \* \*

Dean burst through the door of the rustic cabin just ahead of Sam. He held the .45 at arm's length, sweeping back and forth as he led the way from room to room. He could feel the rage boiling up inside him, the strong desire to give in to the overwhelming force deep within him that had been waging war for his very soul for the past couple of weeks. He was looking for something to hurt and Laura was as good a target as any.

He rounded the doorway into one of the cottage's bedrooms, halting abruptly and having Sam nearly propel him into the room when his younger brother didn't stop as fast. The sight before him almost caused Dean's last meal to make a second appearance. Laura was squatted down on the bed beside Kyle Williams, a vicious-looking knife held upraised in her hand.

She looked up at Dean when the commotion of the brothers' entry interrupted her from her macabre task. He could see the bizarre mix of intricate, almost surgically precise incisions, along with more reckless, violent stab wounds.

It was those wounds that were the most brutal, the blade tearing through muscle and viscera on its destructive path in only to trail subcutaneous tissue on the way back out. The blood that was splattered on the walls and ceiling of the bedroom bore cruel testament to the amount of torture that had been inflicted on the young priest.

Laura growled at him like the animal Dean believed her to be. He responded by stepping further into the room and aiming the .45 directly at her head.

"Shoot me! Do it Dean," she taunted, plunging the knife into the bearded priest before the hunter could even react.

"You bitch!" he shouted back, his finger tightening reflexively on the trigger but not pulling enough tension to fire the weapon.

"Help me, Dean," Kyle begged weakly, his faced turned outward so that Dean couldn't help but see the dark, pleading eyes or the thick line of blood that ebbed from the cleric's mouth.

"Yes, Dean, help him. Save him. Can't you do that?" Laura goaded him on, once again thrusting the blade deep within Kyle's belly, splattering blood all over Dean as she withdrew it.

Kyle reacted with a hoarse groan, struggling weakly against the bonds that held him spread-eagled on the bed. His eyes rolled back in his head and Dean thought for sure that the holy man had taken his last breath.

"Dear God, please save me," Kyle moaned faintly.

"Hold on, just hold on," Dean implored.

"You can't save him, Dean. You don't even believe in the God he serves," the demented blonde sneered at him.

"Back away from him now or I'll fill you so full of lead that you'll set off every metal detector within a hundred miles," he answered, his finger tightening on the trigger even more.

*Doit,doit,doit,doit,doit,doit...* the dark voice inside Dean pushed at him.

Laura laughed at him and his index twitched. Except, nothing happened, the .45 didn't fire. Dean tried to pull on the trigger once more, but this time even his finger wouldn't move.

"What's wrong, Dean? Can't do it?"

He tried to switch the weapon to his other hand, but in that short instant, his hand was frozen, immovable. As he stood there, surrounded by a hemorrhaging priest and a deranged young woman, Dean stood helplessly as a wave of ice rushed up his arms like an avalanche of snow.

"Dean! Do something. Help him," Sam's voice pleaded from behind him.

*Cold, like he'd never been cold before in his life, Dean was frozen in place, every muscle unwilling to obey the commands that his brain sent to them. Freezing, but he couldn't even shiver, the only things that still seemed moveable were his eyes.*

*He looked around the room again, looking at Kyle, looking for Sam and suddenly the view changed. Instead of the rustic interior of the cabin, he was looking out of a plexi-glass shroud.*

*In a panic, Dean felt his own breath reflected back in his face from the nearness of the inside of the Cryo-chamber. He was trapped inside, suddenly feeling like a giant human rat frozen inside of a test tube. The claustrophobia alone would have been enough to have set his nerves on edge, but the enveloping icy embrace, holding him immobile, was more than Dean could stand.*

*Outside the tube, Kyle was still lying there, still looking up to Dean with pleading brown eyes set within a bloodstained face. Dean could see him mouth the words "save me" even though the sounds couldn't break through the thick metal chamber. Paralyzed, Dean was forced to watch as a maniacal Laura stabbed his friend over and over again.*

*He screamed out in a mixture of rage and fear, the sound of his own voice echoing within the chamber until his lungs threatened to seize up from the subzero mixture being pumped in around him. He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling eyelashes adhere to his cheeks as tear ducts crystallized.*

*And outside the chamber, Laura laughed, while Kyle died.*

*But this wasn't real either; they saved Kyle from the cabin and he had never been trapped in one of those godforsaken cryo-chambers.*

*"Not real, not real, not real," Dean repeated like a mantra, concerned more with convincing himself than whoever else, real or imagined, might also hear him.*

*"Oh, it's very real, Dean," Laura assured him. "You failed to save Kyle. Better luck next time."*

*"Next time?" he questioned, eyes still crimped tightly closed.*

*When she didn't reply, Dean chanced opening his eyes, blinded briefly by the glare of eight-thousand foot candles of surgical lighting. His body still not responding, he couldn't lift a hand to shield his eyes, instead squinting until they adjusted.*

*When the new surroundings finally came into view, Dean could see Laura back before him. She was dressed in green surgical scrubs and standing beside a long metal table. Dean was mildly relieved when Kyle was absent from the table, but still more than morbidly curious when he saw the human-size form under a white sheet.*

*"You couldn't save Kyle. Do you think you'll have any better luck with Sam?" Laura hissed, throwing back the sheet.*

*Dean struggled to hold back the gasp that hung at the back of his throat. Underneath the pristine, white shroud lay his brother, rigid and unmoving, his eyes open but cast up toward the ceiling.*

*"Sammy!" Dean shouted, forcing his abused vocal cords to obey the thought and form the word.*

*"Save him, Dean. If you can!"*

*He fought to bring his hand up, still feeling the metal of the .45 in his palm, but unable to make use of the weapon. Dean's eyes flashed over to the examiner's table and to his brother. Like himself, he could see Sam's eyes blink, but his brother had yet to move, and like himself, despite his paralysis, Sam was still able to speak.*

*"Dean, please help me," he begged, soulful eyes seeking Dean's hazel.*

*Laura raised her hand and a scalpel glinted in the bright lights of the morgue. While Dean watched helplessly, she began to carve on Sam's chest, much in the same way that she had the priest's.*

*Blood seeped from dozens of thin cuts, coating Sam's upper body in a thick glaze of dark red. Sam groaned aloud but he never cried out, instead locking his eyes on Dean's as he stared defiantly past Laura.*

*She never stopped her torturous procedure; not when the tears fell from Sam's eyes, not when Dean threatened and then begged her, not even when the thin blade of the scalpel snapped off under Sam's collarbone. She continued with the remnants of the instrument as Dean remained frozen, both figuratively and literally, in place.*

*"Stop, stop please! I'm begging you," Dean pleaded. "I'll do anything you want, just stop hurting him."*

*Laura paused and for a moment Dean thought he saw a certain softness return to her eyes. She dropped the bloody piece of scalpel to the table with a metal clink and stepped off to the side.*

*Dean felt his shoulders sag with relief even though he was still locked in position. He cast an encouraging glance over to Sam, hoping it conveyed to his brother the assurance that he was going to get them out of this somehow.*

*"Hang in there, Sammy. I'll make sure this bitch pays in full for everything she's done," Dean thought to himself.*

*"Now Dean, after I was nice enough to feel sorry for all that pitiful begging you were doing. You're going to talk like that?"*

*"What? How... how did you know what I was thinking?" he asked in a panic.*

*"It's your nightmare, Dean. I'm just playing by the rules you give me. Now what do you suppose I could do with this?" she asked, brandishing an electric bone saw.*

*Dean shuddered, the first response his muscles gave of their own accord, as she turned the device on. He screamed in horror as she brought it down on Sam's chest, sending blood, skin and eventually bone spitting off in several directions.*

*Dean screamed out Sam's name, much the same way he had before, squeezing his eyes shut and refusing to watch as Laura finished her version of an autopsy on his brother.*

Strangely, when his voice gave out from screaming, he also noticed that the faint buzz of the bone saw was gone as well. Fearing the worst, Dean chanced opening his eyes, but the light that greeted the hazel this time was not the harsh glare of the surgical light but rather the reddish glow of the dying afternoon sun.

For a moment, he realized he was still caught in that interlude between dream and consciousness, when neither could be fully grasped. Dean sensed more than saw someone move nearby him and briefly hoped that it wasn't Laura.

As his eyes focused slightly more, he saw that he was in a room. While it wasn't the morgue, it didn't look much more inviting. The walls were a nondescript gray and devoid of any real decoration.

Someone moved again in the room and Dean struggled to prop himself up and see who it was. The fact that he was lying flat did not go unnoticed, as did the returning smell of the bedding he was lying on. Although he was now certain that the recent memories of Laura were nothing more than a horrific nightmare, one thing seemed to have remained constant; his inability to fully move.

He fought against the physical restraint, the action only igniting a kaleidoscope of pain flashing throughout his right shoulder and into his chest. Dean stifled the groan that was a designer match to the pain and instead chose to focus more on using it to help clear his mind.

Pain? Shoulder? He remembered with a little more clarity now. He'd gotten hurt on a hunt and Sam had taken him to the local hospital to get his shoulder fixed. That explained it; the pain, the inability to move his arm, the drab room. Yet, it didn't quite explain everything.

For instance, no hospital he'd ever been in had smelled this bad. And he was fairly certain that while he had hurt his right shoulder, there wasn't any reason that his left shouldn't be working. And what was with all that screaming and yelling now that he thought about it? Had they stuck him on the psych floor with all the crazies half out of their minds?

*"Okay, time to go," he thought to himself. "Sam?" he called out tentatively.*

"Sammy?" Dean called again as the figure in the room moved closer to his bedside.

"How long I been out? What time is it? Dude, what the hell did they give me? I swear, I been dreaming shit that would make Wes Craven jealous," he rambled.

"Go back to sleep, Dean!" the disembodied voice ordered.

"Dude, I'm not five. I don't need a nap. Come on, man. Find my doc and get me out of here!" Dean whined, struggling harder to sit up.

As he edged up on his left shoulder, Dean could just make out the heavy white jacket that bound his arms to his chest.

"What the hell..."

The figure closed the distance, leaning down beside the head of Dean's bed. At first, the hunter could make out blonde hair, a relatively tall build and the tell-tale white coat of a physician. But as the doctor bent nearer, Dean recoiled in fear as blue eyes suddenly gave way to ebony.

Dr. Kurt Vogler savored the fear that poured off the hunter, actually sniffed it off the air much like a hound catching a scent. He watched as the young man fought in vain to move himself away, legs pushing off from the foot of the bed.

"I wish I could tell you that you're just wasting your energy struggling, Dean. But the truth is, I rather enjoy watching you struggle," Vogler laughed.

"What the hell are you?" Dean snapped back. "What do you want?"

Vogler laughed again, deep in his throat, the sound having an edge that was purely demonic.

"Ah, Dean. I'm so disappointed. After everything I'd heard about hunters, I'd have thought you would have known exactly what I am."

"Yeah, another demonic sonofabitch. Don't you guys have anything better to do than come after us or is my family worth bonus points or something?"

Vogler shook his head, reaching out as he did to ruffle Dean's short cropped hair like a small child.

"Now Dean, is that any way to speak to your doctor? You have so many deep-seated fears and family issues, I think we're only just beginning to scratch the surface."

"Yeah, well screw you, doc. You ain't nothing more than some black-eyed bastard that I'm going to send packing straight back to hell," Dean spat back.

"No, Dean. I'm so much more than some ordinary demon. Why, I'm your worst nightmares!"

\* \* \* \*

Sam reached York County Hospital in a squeal of tires, actually stopping the Impala a fraction of an inch from hitting a hospital security van. He jumped out, casting the guard an apologetic look and quickly muttered something about a wife being in labor.

The guard smiled knowingly and waved Sam on. The young man tore up the ramp to the ER entrance, for once glad that his long legs afforded him the ability to eat up ground. The automatic doors opened too slowly and Sam was forced to pause while they slid open.

Once inside, he retraced his way to the registration desk from the night before. An older woman sat behind the desk, oozing no-nonsense from the very set of her posture. Sam approached the counter, plastering the largest smile he could across his face.

"Excuse me," he began. "I need the room number for Dean Hammett, please."

The woman looked up at him, noting the shaggy, unwashed hair, the sweat-sheened face, and she raised an eyebrow skeptically. With a humph of air, she turned to the computer in front of her and began typing on the keyboard.

Sam continued to smile as he watched her tap on keys, her expression becoming even more serious.

"Sir, that patient was discharged from the ER earlier this morning," she announced.

"Are you sure? Sam asked, leaning over the desk and straining to see the monitor. "I was told they were admitting him so that Dr. Blane could follow up today."

The woman shot Sam an angry look, turning the screen so that Sam's view was obscured.

"Sir, there is no further record of that patient. He was not admitted, he was discharged. Perhaps Dr. Blane was going to follow up with him in his offices."

"No, I doubt that," Sam replied. "Ma'am, look, this is my brother. I left him here this morning at five. He was supposed to be admitted and now he's gone. He didn't come back to the ... well, he didn't come home and he wasn't exactly in any shape to have gone anywhere else. Is there any chance there could be some sort of computer mix-up?"

The woman's scowl softened considerably as she saw the sincerity and concern in Sam's face. She went back to the keyboard, typing again, but soon looked up shaking her head.

"I'm really sorry. I've tried everything I can think of and other than the record of the ER visit, there simply isn't anything else about your brother in the system," she said.

Sam nodded, the smile now gone from his face, replaced by the overwhelming feeling of dread. He thanked the woman, turning to lean against the counter as he looked up and down the hallways leading off from the central information desk. Part of him wanted to run through the hospital, screaming Dean's name at the top of his lungs, but he knew that wasn't an option.

Spotting the dark-haired Ebersol heading down the hallway, Sam pushed off the desk and chased after the resident. He caught the ER physician just as they entered the unit. Startled, the young doctor spun around defensively as Sam's arm touched his shoulder.

"Oh, Mr. Hammett. What are you doing here?" he asked, spotting Sam.

"Looking for my brother. Where the hell did he go?" Sam demanded, feeling the muscles in his arm tense as his subconscious considered a more physical approach to getting answers.

Ebersol looked panicked, perhaps sensing that the disheveled young man standing so close to him was not one to be toyed with. Or, it could simply have been that the doctor noticed that Sam's right fist was clenching open and closed repeatedly.

"Hey, hey now," he fumbled, raising his hands defensively. "I tried to keep your brother here. Hell, I wanted to keep him locked up for his own good. But he signed himself out AMA before I could get him sent upstairs."

Sam felt the pressure rise up in his chest, his head swimming from the implication of what Ebersol had said. He could feel the anger seething through him as he gripped the front of the resident's scrubs.

"You bastard, you lying bastard. You said you just wanted to keep him for observation, not to lock him up in some looney bin!" Sam shouted. "You screw him up with all the medication, leave him barely conscious and I'm supposed to believe that he just got up and walked out of here?"

"I had our staff Psych evaluate your brother, I'm not an idiot."

"Well that's debatable ..."

Ebersol glared at Sam's interruption before he continued. "Dr. Vogler evaluated your brother, who was obviously alert and oriented for the interview, and said that he was perfectly stable. There was no reason to keep your brother here and Vogler said he was insisting on leaving. I couldn't medically keep him here, so I signed off on the papers."

Sam let go of the scrubs, taking a step away and relaxing slightly. He sucked in a deep breath, noting that Ebersol did likewise.

"Alright, where can I find this Dr. Vogler. I want to speak with him." Sam demanded.

"He's not on staff today, but stop at the desk and they can give you the number to his service. Look, I know you don't believe this, but I really was just trying to do what was best for your brother," Ebersol implored.

Sam tried to stifle his anger, but he simply nodded at the doctor and stalked off toward the desk. The nurse at the counter furnished him with the psychiatrist's number, smiling at him more pleasantly than Sam had the desire to return. He stuffed the note into his pocket and turned to head for the exit, holding out some hope that Dean might be waiting at the motel when he returned.

He was nearly to the Impala when a soft touch on his right arm halted him. Sam turned to see a young woman in plain scrubs standing breathlessly behind him. She held a small envelope in her hand and pushed it out towards him now.

"Sorry," she began, trying to catch her breath. "I saw you leaving the ER and I remembered you and your brother from last night."

Sam shook his head, he was too tired to remember her face and her nametag was no additional help. The girl pushed the envelope forward more insistently, prodding Sam to take it from her hand.

"Your brother left this behind when he was discharged this morning. There wasn't a contact number on his file, so I'm glad I saw you. I can't imagine he'd want to lose that," she explained.

Sam said his thanks and she trotted happily off, apparently content in having completed her mission. Turning back to the car, he sank into the driver's seat and tore open the end of the sealed envelope.

Dumping out the contents, he felt panic rise up in his throat and the voice that had been silent began screaming once again as Dean's silver ring fell into his hand. Sam remembered placing the ring in his brother's hand before leaving the ER this morning. He knew there was no way that Dean would have ever voluntarily left the ring behind. Sitting in the Impala as the afternoon sun began to set, Sam's heart sank in his chest.

Sam slammed the phone down on the nightstand sending the lamp wobbling precariously close to the edge. This was the fourth message he had left with Dr. Vogler's office and the sixth call he'd placed with the psychiatrist's answering service over the past two days. Every time he called, he was told that the physician was either seeing patients or involved in session.

Frustrated, Sam considered driving to the doctor's office and waiting on him. Hell, at this point, Sam was ready to track the bastard down at his private house if it meant getting answers about Dean any sooner.

The dark-haired young man sank back against the headboard of the bed. He simply did not know what to do next. He'd already driven over most of York County thinking that a disoriented Dean could have maybe ended up walking in nearly any direction.

Sam had been in every bar, every diner, every motel or bed and breakfast in over fifty square miles of the southeastern Pennsylvania countryside. He'd even checked out a couple of barns, each time a shiver coursing down his spine as he recalled the last time he found Dean in a Pennsylvania barn surrounded by bloodthirsty vampires.

He looked at his watch, realizing grimly that it was now long past noon, yet he hadn't eaten breakfast or lunch. His stomach growled at him, angry at the thought of food.

"Shut up!" he ordered the grumbling in his abdomen. *When was the last that Dean would have eaten?*

Sam recalled dinner in the little restaurant just before they headed out for another evening spent hunting for the gargoyle. Dean had been irritated, his cheeseburger

had come back missing onions and with lettuce instead. On top of that, the little eatery had run out of French fries and had brought him cottage cheese as a substitute.

"I can't eat this *crap*," he bemoaned to Sam, picking off the lettuce and flicking it down on the plate with disgust.

"Dean, you always eat *crap*," Sam laughed back. "What's so different about this? Just take off the lettuce and I'll ask them to bring you some onions. It's not that big a deal."

Dean cast Sam a dirty look as if to say that he had been offended well past any measure the establishment could take to rectify the situation. He picked up the burger and sniffed it like it was poisonous. Sam rolled his eyes at his brother's childish behavior.

"Good grief, Dean. Just eat the damn thing," he grumbled impatiently.

Dean took a large bite, chewing briefly and acting as though he was about to gag. He quickly grabbed the glass of Pepsi sitting on the table and washed the mouthful down nearly whole.

"I'm so gonna need a couple of beers when we get done tonight. Something to get the taste outta my mouth," he whined.

Dean never got that beer Sam now sadly remembered. Actually, Dean never really ate much more past that first bite he realized. That meant that his brother might be at least three days without anything to eat and that was assuming that Dean was even ...

"No! Can't even begin to think that way!" Sam shouted out loud.

He swung his legs back over the edge of the bed, reaching for the phone once more. His hand paused briefly as he considered dialing for the local police. He was that desperate at this point, not sure where else to look or what to do.

He stopped just short of dialing, wondering what story he could give the authorities or how he could divert them from Dean's identity and police record that still unjustly hounded him from St. Louis. A false name wouldn't work, not if he had to provide a picture. Besides, Dean Winchester was supposed to be dead.

Sam put the phone back down on the receiver, his head dropping into his hands. He ran his fingers through his disheveled hair, slowing as his fingers reached his temples to rub the tension there.

*Maybe if I call Dad or Bobby? Any extra help at this point.*

But even as he hit the speed dial to his father's cellular, he knew there would be no live voice on the other end of the receiver.

"You've reached John Winchester, leave a message..."

Sam waited for the beep, quickly deciding what he would say. "Um, Dad, it's Sam! I need you to call me, please! I'm in York, Pennsylvania and I can't find Dean. He was hurt hunting and when I got back to the hospital, they said he was gone. Dad, I know you might still be pissed about the whole deal with Haris, but I think something is really wrong here and I think Dean is in some sort of bad trouble. I need help finding him."

His voice trailed as the voicemail ran out and beeped its ending. Sam stared at the phone a moment longer before he absently pushed the button to cancel the call.

Would his dad call back? Sam really wasn't sure. After all, John Winchester's track record with returning emergency calls was sad at best. Sam's mind reflected over other desperate calls to his dad, none more frantic than the one he'd placed when Dean had lay dying in the hospital with a damaged heart.

*Yeah, if he couldn't manage to call when Dean was dying, then I suppose Dean going missing won't warrant a record breaking response.*

"What the hell good is having a cell phone if you're never going to use the damn thing?" Sam shouted aloud. He briefly considered tossing his own against the wall, frustration and worry overwhelming him, when the cell warbled to life.

Sam nearly dropped the phone, bouncing it back and forth between his hands as he fumbled to answer it. He didn't even bother to look at the caller ID, immediately assuming the identity on the other end.

"Dad? Thank god you called back. I didn't know what to do or where to look anymore," he rambled out.

There was a pause on the other end before a lighter voice than John's low timbre sounded on the line.

"Uh, I'm returning a call to Sam Hammett. This is Dr. Kurt Vogler."

"Oh! Uh, Dr. Vogler," Sam stammered. "Thanks for calling. Sorry, I thought you might be my dad calling back."

"No problem. What can I do for you Mr. Hammett? I'm sorry that it took me so long to return your call. I've been busy with an especially interesting patient lately," the doctor stated.

"I was just wondering what you could tell me about your evaluation of my brother the other morning?" Sam asked.

Vogler paused again, clearing his voice. "Well, really, I can't tell you anything; you know, patient confidentiality and all."

"I know, sir. But my brother apparently signed himself out of the hospital right after you finished with him. He hasn't been seen since. I can't find him anywhere and we're not from around here so there's nowhere else he could go."

Sam tried to hide the distress and fear in his voice, failed miserably and settled for adding a desperate "please" to his explanation.

"Well, really Mr. Hammett, there isn't much to tell you. I was called in to evaluate your brother, which I did. I talked to him for maybe fifteen minutes or so down in the ER. He answered all my questions competently. He was alert and oriented and not delusional in the least. I really had nothing to base any further evaluation or a twenty-four hour observation on," Vogler recounted.

"Did you see him after that?" Sam asked.

"Not really. I finished my shift not long after. Your brother was adamant about getting out of the hospital. I alerted the ER resident and they completed the discharge papers for him."

Sam sighed dejectedly. He didn't know what information he had hoped the psychiatrist might have provided, but hearing that Dean had been lucid and normal somehow wasn't the most comforting news.

"Well, thanks for your time," Sam offered graciously.

"I'm sorry I couldn't help more. I hope your brother is okay."

Sam nodded silently, preparing to end the call when he quickly sprung one final question.

"Oh, Dr. Vogler, just one quick question. Do you remember what time it was when you went in to see Dean?"

"Well, let's see. I had a breakfast conference at eight and I had to go home first. I suppose it was around five-fifteen, maybe five-thirty at the latest," the psychiatrist answered.

Sam absorbed the information stoically, thanking the doctor once again before hanging up.

He cast the phone down onto the bed, his mind whirling with the last bit of intel. If he had thought for an instant that whatever had become of Dean happened after his brother left the hospital, then Sam now felt certain that wasn't the case.

There was no way Vogler could have interviewed Dean and been out of there by five-thirty when Sam had left his brother unconscious around five. Between the heavy sedation, not to mention the Demerol that was still burning through his veins, Sam knew enough about narcotics to know that Dean couldn't possibly have answered any questions, much less have appeared alert and oriented.

With renewed purpose, Sam flew over to the silent laptop sitting on the table across the room. His fingers pecked frenetically on the keyboard, his heart pounding as he prayed that this new lead would bring him closer to finding Dean.

His worry increased, feeling more disturbed than before by why the psychiatrist would have lied about his brother. He wondered briefly if this is how Dean had felt when he had been taken by the Benders. As Sam continued to work on the computer, he just hoped that wherever Dean was, it didn't involve crazed human-hunting hillbillies.

\* \* \* \*

As his brother scoured southeastern Pennsylvania in search of him, Dean lay nearly immobile on the filthy mattress. While Sam counted every second that passed while Dean was missing, his brother remained caught in a whirlpool of ongoing nightmares.

Past memories, old hunts, familiar faces all flashed through his head like a runaway freight train. In and of themselves, the nightmares wouldn't have been so bad except each time the memories became more and more twisted. People he'd saved now died brutally as his mind forced him to watch. Old hunts that had been successful were now Technicolor failures. The common thread in each dreamscape was that Dean could do nothing more than stand by and helplessly watch as things went grotesquely wrong.

On some level, Dean knew the nightmares weren't real. There were moments of lucidity when he could just manage to convince himself that most of them were nothing more than warped representations of the original. But each time he tried to pull himself up out of the tidal surge, another wave of terror would suck him back down again. It was like drowning in a sea of fear and pounding heartbeats, unable to surface and grab even the briefest breath of air.

Worst of all, at least as far as Dean was concerned, was the absolute feeling of helplessness that engulfed him during each replay. Visions of his dad or Sam dying at the hands of some demon or spirit buffeted him while he could do nothing more than stand frozen in place and watch as they gasped their final breaths. And each time, when Dean thought he couldn't withstand another second of the horrible visages, he'd wake up screaming one of their names.

He'd lost count how many times he'd surfaced from the dark mire of his mind, but if the searing burn in his throat was any indication, then it had been more than a few.

It was during one of his more coherent and dreamless moments that Dean found himself now. He'd awakened to the dull shadows of late afternoon creeping across the walls of his gloomy cell like slow-motion Daevas. He watched as the strange shapes took on a life of their own right before his eyes, knowing full well that his mind was helping feed his paranoia.

As the seconds ticked by, Dean waited for the razor-sharp claws to slash into his flesh as they had in Chicago. "Not real, not real," he steadfastly reminded himself, squeezing his eyes tightly closed.

When he allowed himself to peek through veiled lids, the shadows were gone, replaced instead by light that barely broke through the small wire-reinforced window in the door across from where he lay. The door itself looked solid, imposing, far more so than the average hospital room door. Dean could see the heavy lock buried within the metal, that fact bringing him even further awake as he realized that the strange entry meant he wasn't in any ordinary hospital room.

"Where the hell am I?" he groaned out loud.

The light was growing dimmer, the remnants of the day's sun all but gone with no other source of light immediately replacing it. Desperate to learn as much as possible about his surroundings before he was plunged into darkness, Dean struggled to rise.

He found his arms were still immobile, but memory and the stench of the heavy cotton restraint filled in the gaps.

"This can't be good," he moaned, glancing down at the straitjacket that swathed his upper body in a suffocating embrace. "I sure wish this was some dumbass practical joke of Sam's, but I've got a strange feeling that it isn't."

"How the hell did I end up here?" Dean closed his eyes, searching backwards, trying to piece together some bit of memory that didn't involve heart-pounding terror. He squirmed, irritated by the trickle of perspiration that was trapped in the small of his back. The movement sent a wave of pain through his shoulder, making him bite down on his lower lip.

"Okay, let's start with that," he muttered through clenched teeth.

*The shoulder; pain, ice, and acid. A rooftop in the pitch of night. He was running, chasing after some large, imposing shape into the darkness.*

*One rooftop went by, then another, as he charged after the creature. Sam was matching him stride for stride, his longer legs helping him overtake Dean. He shouted something back at his older brother just before he leaped the narrow chasm between the buildings. Dean followed behind his brother, enjoying the moment of weightlessness as his body hung in the air.*

*His feet slammed into the cinder and tar surface of the roof, the impact sending a bone-numbing jolt into both knees. In the next instant, his momentum carried him past the ability to continue his landing and come up running. He tumbled forward, his shoulder driving into the hard surface with as much grace as a three hundred pound acrobat.*

*Dean felt the joint give upon impact, felt the pain a split second later after hearing the loud "pop." It took his breath away; tiny flashes of light threatened his vision.*

*"Dean?" Sam's voice shouted back to him through the darkness. "You okay?"*

*He forced himself to one foot, then the other, his arm dangling limply at his side. "Yeah. Keep after the damn thing," he yelled back, taking a shaky step in Sam's direction.*

*Dean slowly reached the edge of the roof, looking across to the next one before letting his eyes glance down to the ground, three stories below. He'd lost the momentum of running to help vault himself to the next building and he felt pretty sure that in his present condition, he wasn't going to clear the gap just by backing up and taking a another running start. Looking back down, the hard pavement below mocked him.*

*Worse still, Sam had disappeared into the darkness pursuing the creature. Dean battled internally, part of him screaming to get back in the chase and catch up, worried that his brother was out there without backup. Yet, another part of him reluctantly admitted that his night of hunting was now over.*

*A growl in the distance made his mind up for him and he turned to take several steps back to the center of the roof. He broke into a run, each step jarring his shoulder and forcing him to bite back an audible groan. Pushing off with every ounce of energy left in the muscles of his legs, Dean vaulted the span, a quick flash of panic taking him when he thought he might not reach the other side.*

*For a second time, he landed poorly, but managed to stagger forward and remain on his feet. Sweat was pouring off his forehead and he could feel the throbbing pain in his shoulder keeping time with his heartbeat.*

*Looking up again, he still didn't see Sam and groaned as he thought about having to clear one more jump. Squeezing his eyes shut as he dragged in a deep breath, Dean reopened them when his brother's voice broke the stillness of the quiet night.*

*"Dean? I lost it," Sam informed, suddenly reappearing at the edge of the next rooftop.*

*"Good going, Frances," Dean grumbled back. "Here's another night shot to hell."*

*"Yeah, well I didn't notice your ass keeping up," Sam retorted, backing up to make the jump over to his brother. "You gettin' too old for this, bro?"*

*Dean closed his eyes once again as the heat from his shoulder threatened to amplify the nausea that was churning in his gut. When he reopened them, Sam was at his side, any semblance of irritation replaced by concern.*

*"You're not alright," he announced matter-of-factly, noticing the rigid set to Dean's jaw and the uneven breathing that was a dead giveaway that his brother was not one-hundred percent.*

*"I'm good, just landed wrong is all. Sorry, didn't mean to bitch at you," Dean replied softly.*

*Sam watched him warily, recognizing the attempt to mask the pain of an injury but diffused by Dean's apology and the barely perceptible wavering of his voice.*

*"Well, the damn thing's fast for being stone and it moves like a freakin' gazelle. But, at least we know what we're looking for. We can come back tomorrow night and try again. You ready for that beer yet?" Sam added the last as his own version of a peace-offering.*

*Dean nodded, his vision beginning to lose focus. The heat was nearly overwhelming now, but he knew he had to hold it together just a little longer.*

*"Yeah, cold beer. By the pitcher," he agreed, slowly following Sam to the top of the fire escape.*

*"Never got that beer, Sammy," Dean lamented now, running his tongue across dry, cracked lips.*

*He fast-forwarded through what he remembered of the rest of the night. The slow, methodical descent down the ladder, the numbness of his hand when he tried to fish out the keys to the Impala, the attempt to hide the extent of his injury from Sam and failing miserably.*

*The trip to the ER was a life-study in jaw clenching silence, as was the initial examination. It wasn't until the radiologist seemingly attempted to finish what he'd started on the roof, that Dean surrendered to vocalizing his pain, letting loose with a string of expletives as the tech positioned his arm for the x-rays.*

*He remembered the dark-haired doctor coming in and giving him the prognosis, but things after that became hazy. Dean recalled pain being replaced by all-over warmth. Not the searing heat of earlier, but rather that warm, snuggly kind of sensation after a healthy dose of Nyquil.*

*Dean remembered Sam's face hovering close to his own, his brother's eyes reflecting more than just their normal worry. He could vaguely hear Sam's voice, calming him, reassuring him, and then pleading with him. But beyond that, everything else was blank.*

*"Which still doesn't tell me why I'm here or where here is," Dean grouched.*

*The room was pitch black now, the light from the outer hallway illuminating a small portion of his confines just inside the door. The noises of other patients broke the silence on occasion, each time sending a shiver down Dean's spine.*

*There was no denying where he was now. The straitjacket, the tormented screams, the dismal surroundings all pointed to one conclusion. Had he not remembered arriving in Pennsylvania, the temptation to think he had somehow gotten transported back to Rockford would have been undeniable. Had Roosevelt been this bad in its heyday?*

*The screech of the door being pushed open drew Dean's attention but he quickly turned his face away at the glare from the sudden burst of light from the hallway. He could feel the movement of someone coming into the room but his eyes hadn't yet adjusted to make out the form.*

*Even if the short, white coat hadn't been a dead giveaway, Dean knew that it wasn't Sam. As his eyes blinked clear, pupils constricting to allow for the sudden brightness, Dean made out the face that appeared over him, the familiar pale skin, blond hair cut short, and blue eyes that just as quickly skimmed over black.*

*"You!" Dean snarled, cringing away as recognition flooded his head.*

"Now, Dean. I'm sorry I'm late getting back to you this afternoon, but you aren't the only patient I have to take care," Vogler said, squatting down beside the edge of the bed so he could meet the hunter at eye level. "Besides, I thought you could use the break. Sometimes when the therapy is too aggressive, well, let's just say that I've lost a patient or two."

Dean remained defiantly silent, the feeling of being trapped, frozen in place, as real now as it had been in any of his recent nightmares. There was no question that the doctor was possessed by a demon, the black orbs boring into him was evidence of that. But without the use of his arms to fight, without a single weapon or Latin incantation at his disposal, Dean knew he was in trouble.

"Have you been sleeping well?" the young doctor asked, not bothering to hide the smirk on his face. "Anything we should talk about?"

"Well, we could start with the fact that the bed is a bit on the lumpy side. Oh, and you should seriously consider firing the cleaning service, 'cause I've been in landfills that smelled better than this room. And well, now that you mention it, the room service is pretty crappy too. I placed my order for a cheeseburger and Coke hours ago," the hunter snarked back.

Vogler laughed, the sound echoing throughout the small space. He leaned in even closer, one hand resting on the edge of the bed.

"I must say, I'm pretty impressed. You can still act so defiant after nearly three days. Most of my other patients were usually slobbering masses of flesh by this point..."

"Patients? Why is it you demons always have to try and be so cute with your words? Or don't you have *victim* in your vocabulary?" Dean interrupted sarcastically.

Vogler huffed out a deep breath, waiting until Dean finished speaking. "As I was saying, most of my patients usually don't respond so well to the therapy. But you, I might have to make a case study out of yet. Still, you are right about one thing, I don't want you fading out so fast. Would you care for a glass of water?"

Dean eyed the man suspiciously, his throat betraying him when he swallowed in anticipation of the cooling liquid.

"Nah, I'm fine. Besides, kinda hard to drink when you have me wrapped up like a Christmas present. Now, if you wanted to let me out of the coat, I might take you up on it. Sam always says I'm pretty messy when I use two hands, I'd hate to ruin the good linens by trying to drink no-handed."

Vogler glared, impressed by the defiance that made this young man such a delectable find, yet irritated by the hunter's blatant refusal to admit how dire his situation really was. His scornful look faded to a sinister grin as a glimmer of an idea entered the demon's mind.

"Well, can't say I didn't try to be hospitable. By the way, I spoke with your brother earlier. He's awfully worried about you. Perhaps I should track Sammy down. I'm sure all that raw fear he's feeling, worrying whether his brother is dead or alive, would be just as sweet as what you've been offering. Tell me, does he have such vivid nightmares too?" Vogler taunted.

"You stay the hell away from my brother or I'll..."

"You'll what? I don't think you're in any position to make that sort of threat," Vogler returned.

"You touch my brother and I swear I'll find a way to send you straight back to whatever pit of hell you crawled out of," Dean threatened.

When Vogler laughed again, Dean lunged toward the psychiatrist throwing his head forward in an attempt to head butt the demonic doctor. Vogler shifted away, allowing Dean's anger-fueled momentum to roll him off the cot and onto the floor.

Unable to break his fall, Dean dropped the two or so feet, landing flat on his chest. The impact sent a surge of pain throughout his upper body, concentrating on the injured shoulder. The dull throb quickly became stabbing agony as the young hunter fought to hold back the yelp.

Before he had the chance to regain any semblance of normal breathing, Dean felt rough hands grab him and roll him over to lie face up. Vogler hovered above him once more and Dean saw the glint of another syringe in his hand.

"Nice try, I'll give you that. Defiance and pain; that should make for interesting subject matter," he murmured in Dean's ear.

Vogler sat back up, one hand pressing onto Dean's chest to hold the writhing young man down, while the other jammed the needle into the exposed flesh at Dean's neck.

It took only a second for Dean to succumb to the effects of the drug, his eyes rolling back in his head as his mind slipped away. He fought during the last moment of coherency, struggling up against the flood of fear that was ready to roll over top and drown him like a swimmer caught in a turbulent sea.

He could feel himself kicking to reach the surface, his lungs ready to burst as the nightmare pulled him downward. With one final internal scream of defiance, Dean broke through the surface, sucking a mouthful of air and yelling Sam's name as he felt himself about to be pulled down again.

But he didn't submerge, instead finding himself popping up out of blue water, cold and numbing to the skin. Legs treading as fast as he could make them move, Dean felt weighted down. As the dreamscape became clearer, the muscles in his arms burned under the strain of a heavy object.

*Dean looked down, the body of Lucas Barr held out before him as he struggled to remain above the waterline of Lake Manitoc. The boy was gray, his flesh deteriorating from having been submerged under the crystal depths for so long.*

*Waterlogged, the rotting corpse of the young boy was too heavy for Dean to hold up as his legs gave under the strain and he felt the cold water slap into his face and rush up his nose. He went under again, still trying desperately to hold on to the boy's body, his mind still shouting to him that Lucas was alive, had lived.*

*With determination born out of desperation, Dean kicked for the surface again. Breaking the water, he sucked in another deep breath, feeling the warm sun as it shone down on his face. Opening his eyes as the water rolled off his hair and lashes, Dean looked for either Sam or Andrea on the dock to help him when something bumped into his side.*

*He twisted reflexively, coming face to face with another body floating in the water. Unwilling to let go of Lucas, he reached out grabbed the form beside him, kicking backwards when he saw the brunette hair and soft features of Andrea, her corpse rotting like her son's.*

*Dean spun around in the water, his hold on Lucas lost as more and more bodies collided into him like floating debris. Andrea, Sophie and Will Carlton, their father; hundreds of bodies covered the lake, each dead and decomposing.*

*He swam for the dock, pushing past the horrific forms, trying to ignore the stench and the gelatinous feel of the corpses as he brushed by them. Reaching the pier, exhausted and breathless, Dean reached to pull himself up to the wooden structure.*

*He was nearly out of the water when something tugged at his ankles. Kicking away, he tried to push off of the unseen thing that was threatening to drown him. One hand on a piling, he pulled up with everything he had, knowing that he needed to break free the phantom's grasp.*

*Just as Dean felt the grip on his ankles give, his body coming up and nearly out of the water and onto the dock, something else breached the surface behind him. He quickly rolled to his back, ready to face the attacker when he gasped at the sight just beyond him.*

*His brother stood at the end of the pier, his body gray, blue-green eyes opaque as they stared down at him. Sam's clothes, like his skin, hung in tatters, a testament to how long his body had been held within the watery grave.*

*"Sammy," Dean called out, his voice filled with remorse as he watched his dead brother reach down and grab his ankles once again.*

*“You couldn’t save me, Dean. You couldn’t save any of us. You let everyone down. So now, it’s your turn to pay,” his brother answered in a chilling whisper, as he pulled Dean back into the waiting depths.*

\* \* \* \*

Sam slammed closed the laptop, expelling air in a dejected sigh. He’d spent the better part of the evening scouring every online reference that remotely mentioned Dr. Karl Vogler.

“Thank God for the World Wide Web,” he mumbled to the empty motel room.

He had dug up a considerable amount of information on the young psychiatrist, most of it glowing accounts of Vogler’s achievements. Transferring from the University of Heidelberg, Vogler had managed to complete his doctorate work at Penn State top of his class without a blemish

Specializing in Post Traumatic Stress Disorders, Vogler had moved on to Philadelphia, taking a position at Mercy Hospital’s Crisis Psychiatric Center, again spotless. When September 11th struck, Vogler had readily volunteered to assist with the more traumatized rescue workers in New York City.

Again, well-respected, beyond reproach, Vogler seemed beyond suspicion. Sam was discouraged, the doctor’s story about Dean just didn’t seem to fit, yet what reason would Vogler have to lie? Still, once Sam found more about Vogler’s more recent activity, maybe things seemed a little more doubtful.

Harrisburg State Mental Hospital boasted one of the largest in-patient censuses of psychotic and dangerous patients in the entire northeastern U.S. Criminally insane and deranged; the place was filled to capacity with the some of the most mentally ill people on the planet. More disturbing was the alarming statistic of how many patients seemed to die whilst being “treated” there.

Sam couldn’t stifle the shiver that ran across his skin as he remembered the history of Roosevelt and how the patients there had rebelled against their sadistic doctor. And who else should be chief of staff at the regional loony bin than Dr. Kurt Vogler.

“Coincidence?” Sam ventured to himself. But at this point the younger Winchester was willing to grasp at any lead, no matter how thin it might be.

“Please don’t let Dean be there,” Sam wished out loud, dread gnawing at his stomach.

But somewhere deep within him, that voice that had been harassing him for the past two days rose up and began to bite at the back of his subconscious.

*Trust your gut...*

*Dean is in trouble...*

*He’d scour heaven and hell to find you...*

*Move your ass Sam!*

Jumping to his feet, Sam grabbed the backpack on the floor by his feet, tossing the laptop into it and slinging it across one shoulder. He moved around the room like a man driven, grabbing his 9mm, stuffing an assortment of other items into another gear bag.

He moved to the door, glancing back over his shoulder at the room behind him. His eyes fell on the empty bed nearest him, Dean’s bed. A glint of silver peeked from underneath the disheveled covers. Sam moved back to the bed, his hand grasping the hilt of Dean’s long Bowie.

There was no need to bring the weapon along with him, it would serve no real purpose. But as he held the knife in his hand, it felt good and solid, tangible and reliable, hard-edged and deadly. It was Dean! And to Sam, at that moment, if he couldn’t have his brother by his side, then Dean’s favorite blade was the closest thing to a physical representation as he could get.

Heading back to the door, he snapped off the lights, plunging the room into darkness. Sam dropped into the front seat of the Impala, firing the engine and pulling the car out on the highway north toward Harrisburg.

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Kurt Vogler strode down the empty corridor of Harrisburg State Hospital's fourth floor. It was late in the evening now and most of the earlier noises of the patients were now silent, creating a creepy feel to the place that always made the doctor smile just a little.

He loved the sinister feel of the place late at night, the utter hopelessness that permeated throughout the hallways during the day. It all heightened his feeding, allowing him to delight in the pain and suffering, both mental and physical, of the patients that inhabited the asylum. This place was a buffet and Vogler couldn't help but consider it an "all you can eat" establishment.

Approaching the nurse's station, he smiled overhearing one of the orderlies comment on how "dedicated" he was to his patients. As he drew closer, one of the staff looked up and handed him a chart.

"Sorry doc, I know you're probably ready to get out of here, but the patient in 432 cut himself on the bedframe and had to be restrained," the burly man informed him.

Vogler nodded, scanning the documentation and quickly jotting down some orders for the overnight staff.

"Oh and speaking of restraints," the orderly continued. "The patient in room 494 has been restrained since he got here. You know the state will have our asses if they find out."

"Yes, well I'm a little reluctant to release him just yet. I'm still concerned that he might try to hurt himself," the doctor answered. "Besides, he came in with a dislocated shoulder, so really, the jacket is probably helping keep that splinted."

"Yeah, well, I'm just saying that he hasn't eaten anything either in all that time and I'm just trying to cover my ass if the state inspectors come in again and find another one like Mr. Bradford."

Vogler smiled warmly at the strongly built aide. "Okay, I'll take care of it. I'll go check on him before I take off for the night and if he's coherent and cooperative, I'll release him from the restraints. Deal?"

The staff member smiled back, trusting fully in the likeable physician. "You want some help, doc?"

"No, no," Vogler answered as he moved off down the corridor toward the hunter's room. "I'm sure I'll be fine. I think the medication and therapy have been doing some him some good. I'll shout if I need anything."

The orderly nodded and turned back to the desk, taking back up his conversation with another staff member, seemingly placated by the doctor's assurances. Vogler glanced back to make sure that no one was watching him as he picked up his pace toward Dean's cell.

He paused outside the door, his eyes glazing over to ebony as he peered through the tiny window. The room was pitch black, but his demonically-enhanced vision allowed him to see that there was no movement on the inside.

He unlocked the door, stepping inside and then relocking it behind him. He didn't bother to turn on any of the lights, knowing full well that the young hunter was lying there awake and watching his every move.

"It seems the staff are concerned about your well-being, Dean. I thought I'd pop in and just check on you before I went home for the evening."

Dean remained silent, refusing to acknowledge the demon's latest taunts. He was exhausted both mentally and physically, the nightmares, the injury, the lack of food and water all taking their toll. In truth, he just didn't have the energy to get into a verbal sparring match with the demon.

"What, no smart-ass replies, no snide remarks? And I was so looking forward to another of your defiant jibes," Vogler continued.

Still, Dean remained quiet, only the shallow whisper of air moving in and out of his lungs gave any indication that he was among the living.

"Well, I guess you don't want to hear about Sam then? Perhaps I should just let you get some rest."

"You bastard, what have you done with my brother?" Dean spat out, unable to ignore the mention of Sam's name or the underlying threat.

A cackle escaped from Vogler's mouth, as he stood shaking his head, staring down at the young man lying before him. "So predictable. I know your triggers oh-so-well by now. You really are an open book, Dean. Really not a challenge at all."

"Screw you!" Dean shouted back, turning his head away from the dark eyes he knew were boring into him.

"You know, it isn't often that something like me gets to play with someone like you. I really am quite honored, the envy of all my peers," Vogler stated.

"Friggin' good for you. Bring in all your buddies, I'll sign autographs," Dean retorted, unable to hide the weariness in his voice.

"Oh no, Dean. I can't do that. You see, my buddies, well, we all just don't share very well with one another. Shame really, there are so few of us around, I'm sure we'd have greater success if we worked together."

"Yeah, too bad. Maybe you can organize the first demon's union or something. Maybe a Demon's Anonymous. 'Hi, my name is asshole and I'm a demonic sonofabitch. It's been two hours since the last time I tortured some poor freakin' soul.'"

"Such the comedian, Dean. But I wonder if you'd be so acerbic if you really understood what I truly was?"

"Oh, I know what you are. I know your kind all too well and I've sent more than my fair share of you pieces of shit right back to where you belong," Dean answered.

"No, I really don't think you do. Have you ever heard of an Alp, Dean? Great hunter like you, I'm sure you've read up on us?"

"Alps? Mountains over in Europe, right?" Dean quipped.

"Funny, Dean. No, we're much more than that. We create and feed off the energy from human's nightmares. Just like you've been enjoying since I found you at the county hospital and brought you here," Vogler corrected.

"I know what a freakin' Alp is. I know what you've been doing. What? Do you need me to tell you what a fantastic job you've been doing screwing with my head?" the hunter snapped back.

"No, that's not necessary. But you should know that I'll continue to feed off you till you're nothing more than a useless drooling husk or... until your body simply gives out from either dehydration or the sheer physical stress of being pounded day in and day out with terror."

"Bring it on, asshole. But you better know too that there are a few places in my mind that not even you want to see," Dean stubbornly taunted back.

"Ah, now there's the defiance I was hoping for. Time just for a quick little midnight snack I think," the demonic doctor said gloating.

Dean felt the bite on his neck, and like all the others that had preceded it, it immediately sucked him down into the haze of a dream. His eyes drooped closed, his heart pounding in anticipation of the vivid movie that was about to play out behind closed lids.

*He felt the cold, damp floor hard against his back, the chill seeping into his spine. He shivered, the movement sending tendrils of pain throughout his chest. It hurt to breathe, it hurt to move and basically it hurt to even think at the moment, his head banging from the sudden impact with the hidden door and then the hard concrete floor.*

*Dazed, he wasn't completely sure how he had ended up flat on his back on the ground, staring up into the maniacal eyes of his brother.*

*"Sammy?"*

*"Why are we here? 'Cause you're following Dad's orders like a good little soldier? 'Cause you always do what he says without question? Are you that desperate for his approval?"*

*"This isn't you talking, Sam..." Dean groaned, unable to conceive that his baby brother had just unloaded both barrels of rock salt into his chest.*

*"That's the difference between you and me. I have a mind of my own. I'm not pathetic, like you."*

*"So what are ya gonna do? Huh? You gonna kill me?"*

*Please Sam, fight it, fight whatever Ellicott's done to you!*

*His brother rambled more, spewing out his derision at being bossed around by Dean, about not finding their dad, hatred oozing off the younger sibling as he stood above Dean, the shotgun still aimed at his brother's body.*

*"Well then, here, let me make it easier for you..." Dean began, panting heavily from the pain in his chest, the torment in his heart, as he reached for the .45 tucked into the interior pocket of his jacket. "Go on, take it. Real bullets are gonna work a helluva lot better than rocksalt."*

*The stainless steel weapon glinted even in the dim light of the dank cellar as Dean offered it up, grip first, hand shaking, to his brother.*

*No, don't take it Sam, please don't do this!*

*"Go on, take it!" he shouted stubbornly as Sam reached down and snatched it from his hand. Dean flinched as Sam dropped the shotgun to the floor with a loud clatter.*

*Sam never wavered, both hands gripping the pistol as he dropped to a shooter's stance, drawing down on his prone brother. His eyes, while still their blue-green, were wild with loathing. Dean didn't blink, merely stared back up at Sam, unable to believe that his brother was holding a gun in his face.*

*Don't do this Sam... fight it... don't pull the trigger!*

*Dean watched, not fearful, knowing full well the weapon's clip was empty. Still, he knew that his brother would never be able to live with the knowledge that he'd actually gone so far as to have pulled the trigger, empty or not. But when Sam didn't relent, the barrel of the .45 mere inches from Dean's chest, he knew that his brother was lost to whatever control the deranged spirit of Dr. Sanford Ellicott had exerted over him.*

*"You hate me that much? You could kill your own brother? Then go ahead, pull the trigger," Dean acquiesced, sensing the seething hatred pouring off of Sam.*

*Sam's hands shook, the weapon wavering back and forth as he seemed to fight unseen voices warring in his head.*

*"DO IT!" Dean shouted, watching in slow motion as Sam's finger twitched.*

*The slide kicked back on the gun, but instead of the hollow click of the hammer striking against an absent round, the explosion that emanated from the pistol echoed throughout the chamber, deafening Dean as he watched the flash from the muzzle flare in his eyes.*

*He felt the bullet slam into his chest, surprised that there was very little pain, only the sensation of an elephant landing on his sternum. It was impossible to breathe, air robbed from his damaged lungs.*

*He jerked involuntarily as the pistol sounded off four more times, each bullet boring into his flesh, tearing through tissue and splattering blood with each impact.*

*"Sam..." Dean cried out weakly, his lungs filling with blood, air leaking out as he began to suffocate.*

*"I really do hate you that much. You took me away from a good life, from a good woman. If you would have just left me alone, Jess would still be alive. Why did you*

*have to drag me back into all this?" Sam snarled at him, his hands still holding the .45 aimed at Dean's face. "You ruined my life, Dean!"*

*"Sam, I never meant to hurt you," Dean choked out. "I only wanted to protect you, to have us all back together again as a family."*

*"Yeah, well, now I'm an only child," the younger Winchester roared back pulling the trigger one final time, smiling as the slug tore into Dean's face spraying skull and brain matter across the dirty floor.*

Inside the small room at Harrisburg State Mental Hospital, Dean's body continued to jerk in response to the nightmare bullets. He groaned aloud, phantom pain ripping through his real body as the slugs tore into his flesh.

Vogler watched on, one hand in contact with the young hunter's forehead, as he fed. His black eyes never faltered, his sadistic smile broadening as he sucked in every last bit of energy created by the nightmare.

As Dean writhed on the filthy bedding, the demon's laugh filled the tiny room, silenced only by the scream that tore from the man's throat.

"SAMMY... Nooooooo!"

\* \* \* \*

The sun rose brightly, beams cutting through the windshield of the Impala as Sam pulled into the parking lot at Harrisburg State Hospital. The lot was relatively empty, so he elected to park the black car closer to the front, not sure why but submitting to the tiny voice that cautioned him that closer might be better.

He attached the fake ID to the lapel of a white lab coat, then grabbed a small backpack filled with everything from his 9mm Glock to the lock pick, holy water, even his laptop to complete the look of a resident.

Having pulled off at a truck stop earlier, knowing he needed to get something to eat and drink if he was going to be any use in rescuing his brother, he'd spent the time waiting on his meal by hacking into the hospital's in-patient records. Although he didn't find any obvious reference to Dean, he scanned through the recent admissions, finding mention of a young male that had been brought in about the same time that Dean had gone missing from York.

He gobbled through dinner, smiling reluctantly when he caught his own reflection in the window, cheeks bulging as he stuffed the food in hurriedly. Green eyes and shaggy hair may have echoed back at him, but it was cropped hair and intense hazel that Sam saw as he looked at the reflection. What he wouldn't have given to have stared back across the table and seen Dean's face buried in some greasy burger, mouth crammed with a handful of French fries as his eyes rolled in culinary bliss.

Back to the present, Sam closed the door to the Impala, pocketing the keys without locking the doors, again feeling the need to be ready for a fast retreat. He bounded up the wide stairs to the main entrance of the building, the old stone front eerily reminding him of Roosevelt.

Once inside, he steadied himself, dropping into the role that he'd created in his mind. He knew the individual units would be locked down, so getting past security was the first hurdle to jump.

Striding confidently up to the information desk, he tilted up the fake ID badge, smiling broadly when the receptionist looked up from his magazine.

"Um, hi! I'm Sam Freedman. I'm a fourth-year from Penn State, supposed to do a rotation with Dr. Vogler today," he began.

The large man leaned over and pulled a clipboard hanging from a peg behind him. He casually flipped through the top two or three pages, a slight scowl creasing his face before he looked back to Sam.

"I don't have anyone on the list by that name. Did you say you were shadowing Dr. Vogler?"

Sam nodded. "Yes, I was working with him down at York County Hospital the other day. He said I could come up here and observe him working with some of the more hardcore cases."

The receptionist's face softened slightly as he accepted Sam's story. "Yeah, Dr. Vogler probably forgot to let anyone know. He's always so busy taking care of his patients, he forgets that there are certain procedures to follow. Nice guy though, totally dedicated, so we cut him some slack."

"Yeah, he certainly is," Sam agreed, trying to hide the derision in his voice.

"Well, I haven't seen him this morning, but he could have come in early before I got here. His office is up on the fourth floor. Here, don't forget your visitor's pass. You wouldn't want to be mistaken for one of the whack jobs in here and get locked up," the man said laughing crudely and handing Sam another badge.

Sam took the ID from him, trying to smile, but finding it difficult to see anything amusing in the man's callous humor. He turned toward the large gate, hearing a loud buzz as the door popped open to allow him entry. He pushed through the door, twitching as it slammed closed behind him.

He tried to brush off the shudder that washed over him, claustrophobia threatening as the hallway narrowed in his field of vision. There was something imposing and intimidating about being locked in this building, but he knew that he had to ignore the feeling until he achieved his mission.

As Sam approached the stairway leading up to the next level, the first sounds of Harrisburg's patients greeted him. Screams of torment, delusions, panic and psychosis echoed throughout the corridors. As desperate as Sam was to find Dean, he silently prayed that his brother wasn't among those that vocalized their insanity. He pushed away the image of Dean languishing among the dismal surroundings.

"Damn, Dean. Please don't be here," he silently whispered as he climbed the staircase.

\* \* \* \*

Dr. Kurt Vogler was in his office early, in fact, he'd never left from the night before. Returning after feeding on the hunter one final time, he'd been taken by surprise upon entering the room and finding a large, blond-haired stranger sitting casually behind his metal desk.

Unafraid, Vogler strode confidently forward. He was a demon after all and a fairly formidable one at that. No matter how imposing the figure was seated in his high-back chair, Vogler felt his power was more than a match for some overgrown human.

He tried to hide the shock that filled him when his body suddenly froze in place just a foot from the edge of the desk. Paralyzed both physically and by fear, Vogler's eyes flashed black as he glared at the man who had still not spoken.

"What do you want?" he asked defiantly.

The blond man's expression never changed, his hands clasped on top of the blotter as his thumbs twirled round and round. He blinked slowly, ice blue eyes more sinister-looking than the demonic black that stared back.

"You have something that belongs to me," the man calmly stated.

Vogler responded by looking quizzically, unsure what the stranger was talking about. "Do you know what I am?" he answered.

The blond man burst out with a gruff laugh, shaking his head in disbelief. "Do you know what *I* am?" he replied back. "You really should keep up with current events, but then, how can I expect a lesser being like you to possibly understand the greater machinations of things?"

The psychiatrist paled, realization suddenly striking him.

"Whatever you want, anything, please!" he begged.

"I want the hunter."

"The hunter?"

The stranger growled, leaning forward against the desk, his fist pounding down on the top. **“Enough! Do not toy with me! Where is the hunter?”**

The sound of bones cracking filled the small room as Vogler’s human body threatened to collapse. The demon-possessed doctor gasped, panic filling him. “494, he’s in room 494. I’ll get him for you,” he offered, desperate for any opportunity to escape the unseen force that was crushing his current host. “But he’s nearly spent; he’s no use to you.”

The stranger sat back, smiling once again, eyes still wild and intense. “You have no idea of the importance of that man. But no matter, you’ve served your purpose.”

Vogler’s eyes widened as the sound of all two hundred and six bones were instantly pulverized within the human shell. Organs and vessels were crushed beneath the flesh, blood oozing from every orifice as the former psychiatrist fell limply to the floor. With a screech, a black cloud escaped from the doctor’s mouth, swirling around the room as the demon sought escape.

The immense man stood, hands raised upward as he began to murmur an ancient incantation. The black mist glided towards an open window, freedom just inches away, when suddenly the ebony vapor froze in the air.

As the chant finished, a sudden shriek filled the space as the cloud ignited into a mass of flames. The sound of a hundred tortured souls screaming in unison rebounded off the office walls as the former Alp was destroyed.

The blond man watched without emotion until the last wisp of fire blinked out. Turning, he casually strode over to where the gelatinous mass of flesh lay in a heap on the floor. Stooping down, he removed a syringe from the former doctor’s pocket.

He moved nonchalantly toward the door and out into the deserted hallway. Walking down the corridor, a faint hint of excitement flashed across the man’s face. 491... 492... 493... **494!**

He stopped in front of the room, eyes narrowing, a smile spreading widely across his face as he peered in through the small window.

“Dean!”

\* \* \* \*

Dean woke, his vision blurry, utter exhaustion dragging at his entire body. A headache pounded within his skull and he startled for a moment, worried that the dreamscape bullet had actually buried itself within his head.

But no, he was alive and breathing, if not in the best of shape. Dean closed his eyes again, hunger, fatigue, and physical pain having taken their toll on his desire to remain conscious. He was just so damn tired; tired of pain, tired of resisting, tired of the non-stop terrors that were sucking the life out of him.

He wanted to escape, knew he needed to find some way out of the serious situation he was in. Desperate to find Sam and make sure that Vogler’s threats were only that. Afraid that the demon had captured his brother as well and might be torturing Sam in some other dark room just beyond his own confines.

But more than anything, Dean just wanted to fall asleep; to collapse into the dreamless state that occasionally occurred when he had been on a long hunt without the chance to rest. He couldn’t remember feeling as incredibly fatigued, so completely trapped, as utterly helpless as he did at this moment.

“Get you ass together, Winchester,” he stubbornly muttered, trying to force his mind to focus on finding some sort of getaway from his predicament.

The door to the room creaked slightly, but Dean made no effort to react as it opened and a shadowed figure stepped inside. His mind swirling, he grasped frantically at any tactic that might get him free.

“Back so soon? Just can’t resist my charm?” he snarked.

When there was no response and the figure moved closer, Dean realized that the

newcomer was not the dreaded Alp. He squirmed to twist his body, ignoring the sharp protest of his shoulder as he tried to lift his head and see the new presence.

The figure moved up to the side of the bed, then stopped, but even at this close proximity, Dean couldn't make out any distinct features. He could only feel the looming size of the person as it leaned in.

"So what is this? Bottom of the ninth and you're the relief pitcher?" he asked sarcastically.

There was a sudden grunt of a laugh and as Dean tilted his head up he finally caught a glance of ice-blue eyes staring back at him. Hope flooded the hunter, born out of desperation and the fear that his brother was in trouble, Dean prayed fervently that this newcomer was nothing more than some overgrown hospital aide.

"Buddy, come on. Can you loosen up this jacket? Please? I know you probably hear this all the time but I promise that I'll be good," Dean offered, his voice a hoarse whine.

The towering figure moved toward him and for a split second Dean thought maybe the new visitor was actually going to help him. One large hand touched Dean's chest, rested there for a moment but made no move to unbuckle the straps that held the straitjacket wrapped tightly around his upper body.

"Come on? Just undo the straps. I promise I won't move an inch. Just let me out of this contraption," he pleaded, desperate to be free of the restraints, to be able to move his arms, his hands, his fingers.

The hand on his chest moved slightly, but not in the direction Dean had hoped. Without a word, the stranger leaned down, his hand splayed open and applying pressure on the hunter's sternum.

With so much sheer bulk behind the hand, Dean felt his ribs cave slightly, air pushed from his lungs as he fought for the next breath. There wasn't time for him to panic as in the next instant Dean spotted the telltale syringe coming at him.

He struggled frantically to avoid the needle, thrashing his lower body since his upper torso was so effortlessly pinned to the mattress.

"Not that crap again!" he protested, knowing his complaint was falling on deaf ears. "Where's Vogler? I never figured him for the sharing type."

Dean flinched as the needle entered the side of his neck, his legs going still as the warmth of the drug flooded over him, instantly dulling his senses. He could feel himself slipping, falling off the cliff of lucidity and plunging headlong into the dark abyss of his mind.

Above him, the figure drew in to eye level, deep laughter filling the room. Dean managed to open heavily-lidded eyes, curious to see his new tormentor. As his eyes looked upward, his ears still filled with the menacing laughter, Dean didn't see the icy blue any more.

The shudder coursed over his body like the deathly cold chill of an arctic wind as Dean saw yellow orbs stare back at him.

"It can't be! It just can't be!" he tried to convince himself as consciousness slithered away.

The figure stood upright, reveling in the anguish and disbelief contained in the hunter's words. He continued to laugh, although not as vigorously, yellow irises gleaming even in the dimly lit space.

"Hello, Dean."

\* \* \* \*

*"Give in, Let go, Have peace" ... the voice inside him continued the litany, never letting up, always gnawing at the back of his brain. He could feel Haris' spawn within him, the source of the voice, the source of the inner torment that had been plaguing him since he awoke in the barracks.*

Even awake, Dean could still visualize the horrible events from the sacrificial chamber. Sammy, lying there complacently as Dean came closer. Sammy, his eyes never wavering, trusting as always, even when Dean had drawn the blade across his younger brother's throat. Sammy, bleeding, life draining from him as he succumbed to death at the hand of his brother.

Dean shook his head back and forth, desperate to clear the memory from behind his eyes. There was no escape for him now. Even if he could manage to evade Haris, his massive guards and the heavily fortified camp, where could he go?

Too many hunters had seen his foul deed; his own father had even tried to kill him, not that he could fault him. He deserved no better. Yet even though he felt as if he'd lost all hope, all reason to continue on, Dean had resisted.

When Haris tried to taunt him, he fought back. When the dark voice of the demon within tried to persuade him to give in and submit he refused. When his amulet became a center of attention, the yellow-eyed demon trying everything from torture to temptation, Dean somehow managed to find the strength to defy him.

Beaten, tempted, tortured and taunted, Dean stalwartly refused to submit. There was just something deep inside him that wouldn't allow him to give in. Maybe it was simply the last thing he could do in honor of his fallen brother.

Hurt, hungry and exhausted, he startled when the door to the barracks room opened and the young disheveled blonde walked in. Carrying a tray of food, the odors assailing him like the sweetest perfume, the girl meekly approached him.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Haris asked, suddenly appearing in the room. "She can be yours, Dean. One of the perks of being on the winning team. You've always wanted a family, why not start with her?"

"I have a family!"

"Had, Dean. Must I keep reminding you?" Haris sneered back.

Haris offered the blonde again, his clawed hand twined within her dingy hair. She's pretty enough. Another time, most certainly another place and he'd have been all over her.

But not now, and never in trade for the amulet. He simply couldn't give up the amulet for the promise of a girl, a family, or even his continued pathetic existence.

"No! Never!" Dean refused.

"Suit yourself, Dean!" Haris replied, his hand moving from the girl's hair and down to her neck. The sound of her spine snapping echoed throughout the cell, a gurgle escaping her lips as she collapsed lifelessly to the floor.

Dean screamed out in fury, rushing to the young woman's side, taking her limp body up in his arms. So much death, all his fault.

He looked up from her glazed-over pupils when the door creaked again. Another young woman entered; a duplicate to the first except for the brunette hair that fell at her shoulders.

"And how about this one, Dean? More to your liking perhaps?" Haris taunted.

Dean rose slowly from the floor, his hands held out in submission. "Please, don't do this," he begged.

"You know what I require," Haris reiterated.

"I can't," Dean answered.

"Fine!" Haris shouted back angrily. The demon grabbed the brunette from behind, his hand encircling her neck as he viciously twisted her head around, a sickening crack affirming that she too had been killed.

Dean launched himself at the demon, his own hands straining to reach Haris, to rip into the pasty flesh of the creature. With a flick of his finger, the demon launched Dean across the room, the hunter's body colliding roughly with the concrete block wall. Dazed, Dean watched as Haris signaled the mammoth guard and the door opened to reveal yet another young woman.

*For several hours the scenario repeated itself. More women, more bargains, more refusals, more death. Dean sunk to the floor, his legs giving out along with his will to fight back.*

*He squeezed his eyes closed, hands covering his ears as he tried to block out the screams of the women as they died.*

*Give in, Let go, Have peace...*

*"No more! No more innocent blood on my hands!" he cried aloud, his fists pounding into the concrete over and over until his knuckles came away bloody and swollen.*

*When he finished lashing out on the unyielding cement, Dean sagged back against the wall, his chest heaving from all the emotion he'd released. As he listened to his heart pounding within his ears, he noticed that the space around him had gone deathly quiet.*

*Then, just as suddenly, Dean heard the repetitive pop of automatic gunfire. He heard the low tenor of his father's voice nearby, shouting orders, commanding the action.*

*"I'm found! I'm saved!" he cried out opening his eyes to meet his liberators.*

*The elation of being rescued rapidly faded as Dean took in the horrific scene about him. Surrounded, the bodies of all the young women sacrificed due to his stubborn refusal lay strewn about the room.*

*Dean struggled to his feet, finding footing difficult as his boots slid on the slimy congealed blood that had pooled from all the dead girls. Knee-deep in corpses, he couldn't move, couldn't even lift his feet to climb over the mountain of dead bodies.*

*He could hear his father yelling out his name, but Dean was unable to reach the door. He strained to pull his feet free, but unseen hands seemed to be dragging him down, into the mire of cadavers.*

*He looked down, thinking to spot what was holding him, when he saw their faces. Melissa! Cassie! Haley!*

*Dean quickly rubbed at his eyes. It wasn't possible. He looked over to his right, cringing as he spotted Jessica's blonde locks tinted red with blood.*

*"No, no... no... no! This can't be real! They were never here!" he cried out tripping over yet another small form.*

*Layla, Andrea, Sarah, more familiar faces, eyes open but glazed white in death. Nearly every woman that was ever important in his life, now lay at his feet, hands reaching up and tearing at his jeans as they sought to pull him down into the bloody pile on the floor.*

*"You could have stopped all this, Dean," Cassie sneered.*

*"It's all your fault that I'm dead, Dean. I saved you, but you sacrificed me," Melissa cried out to him, her dark brown eyes sad and condemning.*

*"You always think about yourself, Dean. What makes you more important than me? What gives you the right to live and me to die, again?" Layla begged.*

*"Layla, I never! I would have given anything to save you," Dean pleaded back.*

*"HA! You never cared about anyone but yourself," Jessica refuted. "You never even cared about Sam. He could have had a life with me if you would have just left us alone."*

*"Or how about me?" Sarah piped in. "I could have loved Sam. But you wouldn't let him be happy."*

*"No, I never! I tried so hard to save you all. I tried so hard to protect Sam. I only ever wanted us to be a family, for Sam to be safe," he fervently explained.*

*"You killed him, Dean. The brother that you swore to protect, that you claim to have loved so much. You slit his throat and washed your hands in his still-warm blood," Haris reminded, suddenly reappearing in the room.*

*Dean threw his hands to his face, the base of his palms pushing in against his eyes until negative images flashed inside his skull.*

*“Dean!” John Winchester’s voice boomed above the ghostly whispers of the dead women.*

*He looked up, smiling faintly when he saw his father’s dark hair and bearded face appear in the doorway.*

*“Dad!” Dean shouted out, trying to surge forward but halting when his father’s eyes turned dark.*

*“Dean, what have you done?” John asked, his eyebrows raised, horrified by the scene of slaughter at his eldest son’s feet.*

*“Dad, no, not me. It was the yellow-eyed demon,” Dean protested. But his father turned away, unable to view the accumulation of dead bodies covering the floor.*

*“Dad, please. I would never hurt them. Not Cassie or Jess, none of them.”*

*“You killed your brother. Why should I even be surprised? Why, Dean, why?” John pleaded for understanding.*

*“You killed us, Dean. Why did you let us die?” The chorus of women whined in unison.*

*Dean buried his face in his hands as his dad and the women continued their verbal assault. He dropped to his knees as hands pulled him down and swallowed him up.*

*“I’m sorry!” he cried out as he submerged beneath the mass of rotting flesh.*

Above him, the towering man stood watching as Dean cried out in his drug-induced sleep. Smiling, yellow eyes sparkling as he looked down at the writhing form of his adversary.

“Welcome to hell, Dean!”

\* \* \* \*

Sam reached Vogler’s office on the fourth floor, silently cursing the building’s architect for not having the decency to put in elevators. He listened cautiously, trying to determine if the psychiatrist was in or not. When no sounds of movement returned, he chanced tapping lightly on the door.

When there was still no answer, Sam reached for the handle, ready to pull out the lockpick if necessary. He was briefly surprised and slightly curious when the door swung open with no resistance.

Sam stepped inside, still alert for any occupants. His suspicion turned to concern when he spotted the emaciated husk of the former physician lying on the floor in front of the desk.

As Sam surveyed the remains, a strong odor of sulfur assailed his nostrils. The younger hunter felt his heart climb up in his throat. He had assumed up to this point that whatever happened to Dean was the result of some “human” action. Now, with blatant supernatural forces having been at play, Sam was even more worried about his brother’s welfare.

“How could I have been so stupid?” he lamented. “I should have known that Dean wouldn’t have fallen to just any psycho yokel.”

Sam rose up, walking over to the desk and poring through the scattered papers there. More desperate than ever to find Dean, the little voice was now screaming at him to move faster. When the search of the desk turned up nothing useful, Sam moved to the file cabinet behind it.

Plopping down into the large leather chair while he sifted through the drawers, Sam caught sight of additional yellow traces of sulfur.

“Demons?” he wondered aloud, his finger tracing through the powdery remains. Something had to have killed Vogler, and by the looks of the remains, whatever had done the job had been pretty powerful.

When the file cabinet turned up no more information than the papers on the desk, Sam moved on to a cabinet on the wall. Locked, it took him only a second to get the door open and reveal the contents.

Reaching inside, Sam found several vials of a dark orange-looking liquid. Each vial was unlabeled and there were a couple of syringes already filled with the strange-looking medication. Sam didn't know what the stuff was, but he was fairly certain that it wasn't something to be found in any pharmacy.

Sam glanced back down to the corpse of the former doctor, angry that the man was dead and that he couldn't beat the crap out of him to get him to talk. For once, he understood his brother's tendency to react to stress by looking to damage something or someone. It was the way that Sam was feeling right now, desperate to find Dean, his one lead now dead, and demons being involved had him ready to tear through the hospital and anyone else that got in his way.

Looking around the room one final time, nothing else jumped out at him. Sam headed for the door, another plan to put in action.

He walked confidently down the hallway, slowing as he approached the small nurse's station. He shifted the backpack to his other shoulder, as he leaned against the counter and cleared his throat to gain the attention of one of the staff.

One of the aides looked up, eyes narrowing as he surveyed Sam. "Can I help you?" he asked gruffly.

"Yes. I'm working with Dr. Vogler today and he wanted me to follow up on one of his patients that was transferred here a few days ago from York County Hospital."

"You got a name on that patient?" the man asked back, still appearing skeptical.

"Um, well. I didn't write it down. Dr. Vogler and I were working with this guy down at York. He invited me up to do some follow-up interviews for a paper I have due back at Penn State," Sam lied.

"Yeah, well nearly every patient on the South Wing is Dr. Vogler's. He gets all the hardcore crazy ones. You're gonna have to give me something more than that."

Sam's mind scrambled. Should he ask for Dean by the alias? Surely Vogler wouldn't have transferred his brother under the assumed name. Not if the doctor was up to no good and trying to hide it from everyone else.

"Uh, well. I do remember that this guy had an injured arm. Right arm, I'm pretty sure. It was a dislocated shoulder I think so it might still be wrapped up," Sam quickly explained.

The man nodded, his suspicion fading as he seemed to recognize the patient Sam was describing. He reached over to grab a clipboard on the counter and then ran his finger down the list of patient names.

"Yeah, that sounds like 494. I've been warning the doc about keeping the guy in the straitjacket for so long. Especially with that hurt arm. He's gonna get us drilled by the state inspectors again if they come in and find that we've left another patient restrained for more than two days. They have rules about that kinda stuff ya know?"

Sam nodded, trying to hide the anger that was boiling up inside him at the mention of Dean being held for days in a straitjacket. He could only imagine how his brother was dealing with the restraint, especially after being buried alive, not to mention that Dean had never done "immobile" very well.

"Yeah, well I know everybody thinks that Dr. Vogler is God's gift to psychiatry, but I'm not much for torturing patients. Everybody deserves their dignity," Sam replied, hoping that his vehemence wasn't showing too much. "So, room 494?"

"Yep. I'm pretty sure that's the one you're looking for. But, there's another doc in there now doing an eval. You'll have to wait till he's done. Don't know what's so special about that nutcase that everybody seems to want to see him today. Just another psycho if you ask me," the man went on, going back to his newspaper.

Sam fought the urge to pull the aide over the top of the counter. Even if he wasn't talking about Dean, there was no reason for a callous jackass like that to be involved in the healthcare of the mentally ill. Places like Harrisburg perpetuated the stereotype of state mental institutions.

Instead, Sam answered the voice that was nipping at his mind, telling him to hurry and find Dean. He forced himself to walk slowly down the hallway, watching as the room numbers slowly climbed.

He turned the corner, trying to block out the sudden crescendo of tormented screams that poured out of the rooms as he passed. He cringed even more as he pictured Dean trapped in this place, restrained in a straitjacket, and forced to listen to the cacophony of suffering.

"I'm coming bro. Just hang on!"

\* \* \* \*

Dean's eyes flew open briefly, catching only a glimpse of bright yellow orbs staring back at him, "Welcome to Hell" still echoing off the stranger's lips. He panicked when he saw Haris standing above him, but before he could gather himself to distinguish real from nightmare, he found himself falling again into the darkness.

*He reopened his eyes to continued darkness, the flicker of several candles providing the only illumination. He moved to look out of the window, the howl of a strong wind only adding to the tension that filled the small cabin.*

*"Give me the Colt, son," his father asked, hand extended outward to receive the ancient weapon.*

*He nearly handed it over right then, convinced that the demon had found them as the tempest brewed outside. But as his hand clasped around the gun, something struck him as "off."*

*"You're not my dad," Dean refuted, trying to hide the shaking in his hand as he pointed the Colt at his father's chest.*

*"Dean, what are you doing?" Sam yelled, coming up from behind him.*

*"There's something wrong with Dad. I think he's possessed, I think he's been that way since we found him," Dean tried to explain.*

*But as he watched, John Winchester's eyes glazed over yellow, a sinister smile spread across his face. Without a word or a movement, Dean watched as Sam was thrown against the nearest wall of the cabin. In the next heartbeat, Dean felt his own body lifted and tossed across the room and into the far wall.*

*He sank to the floor, his breath momentarily stolen as his possessed father casually strode towards him, stopping only to retrieve the supernatural weapon. Demon/John placed the Colt on the nearby table, far out of the reach of either of the two hunters.*

*"You know, you fight and you fight for this family, but the truth is, they don't need you. Not like you need them," his dad spat out at him, yellow eyes giving way to his characteristic brown. "Sam, he's clearly John's favorite. Even when they fight, that's more concern than he's ever shown you. You're worthless Dean. Haven't you figured that out yet?"*

*"That's not my dad talking," Dean refused, but the damage of those words ate away at his soul. It was true, he had a special bond with his dad, one that involved the common interests of hunting, old cars, and classic rock. But if he were to admit it, Sam had always been more "like" their father than Dean could ever hope to be, especially in the ways of the heart, both of them passionate, driven, and stubborn to a fault.*

*"It's true Dean. You're nothing more than a faithful watchdog, there to protect Sam at all costs. John doesn't give a rat's ass about what happens to you," the demon snarled back.*

*"NO!" Dean shouted, crimping his eyes tightly shut, trying to ignore the enmity in the hateful diatribe.*

*When the cabin went quiet, the young hunter peeked out, disoriented as his surroundings had morphed into another place. He looked about the empty hangar, the same one that he and Sam had been ambushed in New Jersey.*

*Feeling a heavy weight in his arms, he looked down. His brother, bleeding, eyes mere slits, looked back at him. Sam had been shot, blood cascading from the wound and covering his upper body. Sam gurgled, more blood seeped from between his lips as he tried to speak to Dean.*

*"Shhh... it's okay, Sammy. I'm gonna take care of you. You're gonna be alright, I promise," Dean sobbed back, tears threatening at the edges of his eyes as he watched his brother attempt to breath.*

*"Dean! What have you done?"*

*Dean snapped around, confusion and shock taking him as his father stood behind him.*

*"I told you to take care of Sammy! Why is he lying there dying? I told you before that he was my favorite. Why is he dying instead of you?" his father shouted, his eyes wild with anger.*

*"Dad, I didn't mean... I tried to protect him. I always tried to protect him," Dean cried back.*

*He looked back down to his brother, Sam's eyes barely focused, looking back at him as life began to fade away.*

*"No! Not real, not real. It was just a graze to the arm. You can't be dying," he begged, a flash of a memory from another hangar, a different ending.*

*"You fight and you fight to save this family, but they don't need you Dean. They never needed you!" Yellow eyes appeared as the image of his father blurred, quickly replaced by the demon. "Sammy left you and went to Stanford. Daddy left you to hunt by himself. No one wants you around, Dean. No one needs you. You're worthless!"*

*Dean turned away, looking back to Sam. Cloudy blue-green eyes flashed back at him, Sam suddenly alert.*

*"I did this for your sorry ass. I sold my soul for you and for what? I had a future, Dean. I gave it all up for you. It should have been you lying here, dying here, instead of me," Sam hissed, one bloodied hand reaching up to grasp at Dean's collar before a sigh escaped his lips and Sam went limp in his older brother's arms.*

*"Sammy, nooooo..." Dean screamed out. "Not you, it should be me."*

*As he rocked his dead brother back and forth, agony pouring out of him, hopelessness overwhelming him, Dean surrendered to the fight.*

*Above him, the demon beamed brightly, a smug smile spread across its face.*

*"Way to go, Dean. Always knew you had it in you," the demon sneered.*

*\* \* \* \**

Sam moved down the hallway, his eyes focused on the room numbers as they increased. He tried to block out all the noises, but the smell of the place was overpowering. Not quite antiseptic, not quite stagnate, it was a caustic blend of bleach, sweat, and generalized suffering. It reminded him of Roosevelt and for the second time this morning, Sam fought down the bile that threatened his throat at the sheer thought of that horrible place and the awful things that had occurred there. He had thought that the old asylum had haunted him because of what had happened between him and Dean, but in truth, it was the overwhelming human misery of the place that reared its head each and every time he thought back on it.

To think now that his brother had been subjected to similar conditions, to a doctor that might have rivaled Sanford Ellicott, made the younger sibling cringe. He shook off the feeling, and focused again on finding his brother.

Not realizing that he had picked up his pace till it was nearly at a jog, Sam abruptly skid to a halt when he eyes caught sight of the number 494 labeled above the entrance to the room in front of him. He rushed up to the wire-reinforced window cut into the door, peering inside.

"Oh god, Dean," he choked out, spotting his brother lying on a thin, filthy mattress.

Dean looked awful, and that might have been giving him credit, and it took everything Sam had not to react to the condition of his brother. Dark-rimmed eyes sat

in a hollowed, gaunt face, his brother's usually strong-looking body seemed far too thin, far too small as it lay bound up tightly in the confines of the white straitjacket.

Sam tried the doorknob first, unsurprised when it was locked. Spotting the large man in the white coat standing at Dean's bedside, Sam next tried tapping on the window, hoping to gain the figure's attention. When the figure didn't so much as twitch, but merely continued to stand over Dean, watching, Sam became wary.

"Hey, can you open up in there?" he called out, but the figure remained in place. "Um, they need you down at the nurse's station," he added quickly.

Sam became distracted when he heard Dean cry out, his voice weak and hoarse sounding. As he watched, his brother began writhing on the nasty bedding, tossing and turning as much as the restraint would allow. Sam could see that Dean was speaking, but couldn't make out what his brother was saying. Yet through it all, the figure remained bolted in place.

Frantic now, his brother in obvious pain, Sam beat on the door with his fist. He worried briefly that the racket might have brought the unwanted attention of the staff, but at this point he didn't care. He was ready to pull the Glock and take out anyone that got in his way of getting to Dean.

With the lock pick in hand, he began to work on the mechanism in the door. It wasn't a standard lock, but then, Sam Winchester wasn't exactly the garden-variety cat burglar either. He nearly had the door open when it suddenly swung inward and the large white-coated man appeared in the entryway.

"Uh, sorry," Sam sputtered, grabbing his backpack as he tried to hide the lockpick and appear nonchalant.

"No problem. I'm finished now," the doctor replied, smiling easily, ice-blue eyes making contact with Sam's.

Sam watched the physician as he casually strode back down the hall, feeling a chill creep over his body at the sight of the imposing man. At the end of the corridor, the strange doctor turned back and made eye contact once again, smiling a second time and nodding at the young hunter.

Sam tried to smile back, but there was something about the man that was not quite right, something underlying the cool exterior that felt evil. He shook off the feeling and quickly turned to rush to Dean's side, but not before a final glance at the man sent a chill up his spine.

*Yellow eyes?*

Sam did a double-take, straining to see the man's face, afraid that he'd seen something but refusing to believe it could be true. As the doctor disappeared around the corner, Sam dismissed it and hurried on to Dean.

He dropped down beside his brother's bed, quickly beginning to unfasten the straps that held the straitjacket in place. Dean was asleep, drugged or unconscious, Sam wasn't sure. But he could tell that his brother was lost in some sort of horrendous nightmare by the way he continued to thrash about.

"Dean, Dean, come on, wake up. Please! Open your eyes. It's gonna be okay now. I got you!" Sam whispered soothingly as he finished the last of the straps and began to untwine his brother's arms from across his chest.

"I'm sorry Dad! I'm so sorry about Sammy!" Dean cried, his mind still playing out the drug-induced vision of his brother lying dead in his arms while his demon-possessed father berated him for failing.

"Dean, it's okay. I'm right here. Open your eyes."

"All my fault," Dean moaned to an unseen listener. "They're all dead because of me. I couldn't save them, I couldn't save Sam. I'm so sorry!"

"DEAN!" Sam shouted, gently shaking his unresponsive brother. "Open your eyes NOW! I'm here. I'm not dead. You did save me! You always save me!"

Slowly, as if each millimeter was a gigantic effort, Dean's eyes opened. The hazel that appeared from beneath his lids was dull and glassy, not the usual bright and dancing blue-green that Sam was so accustomed to seeing.

"Sammy?" Dean groaned hoarsely.

"I'm here Dean. It's alright. It's all over now. I got you," Sam responded, continuing to free his brother from the restraints.

Dean stared up at Sam's face, unable to accept that his brother was actually here.

"Not real..." he began, turning his face away, afraid that he was about to be plunged into yet another dark nightmare.

"I *am* real Dean. Dear God, what did he do to you? I'm gonna get you out of here okay? But I need you to help me out just a little."

Sam moved to pull Dean's left arm from the restraint, appalled at how limp and yielding his brother was. When he turned next to removing Dean's right arm, his brother's tortured cry nearly crushed him. As much as he hated hurting Dean, the pain of moving the injured arm served to make his brother more alert.

"Stop, please," Dean begged, his respirations coming in ragged gasps as he reached up to pull the arm in closer to his body.

"Dean? You with me now?" Sam asked tentatively.

Glassy eyes opened more, recognition seeming to take place as Dean focused on Sam's face again. "Sammy? Is it really you?" he asked hesitantly.

"I'm here Dean. I'm gonna get you out of here and you'll be safe." Sam reassured him, gently placing his hands behind Dean's back and helping him to sit up.

"Sam, I... I nearly..." Dean began, his weakened body teetering on the same edge as his battered psyche.

"Shh, Dean, it's okay," Sam interrupted, sensing how close his brother was to breaking. "Let's get the hell out of here alright?"

Dean nodded. He still wasn't sure where he was or how long he'd been there. He wasn't even entirely sure that his brother was real and standing before him. But after so many torturous memories, it was the closest thing to a happy reality he could recently remember.

"Crappy hospital, dude. Not a single good-looking nurse," he joked, grimacing when he laughed. And in that instant, Sam knew that whatever awful things had happened to his brother, Dean was going to be alright.

\* \* \* \*

Sam came through the motel room door, his body sweaty and covered in dust from finishing off the gargoyle. He'd tried to put off chasing the thing down but Dean would have nothing of it. So he settled for a promise from his brother that if he finished the hunt, Dean in return would remain at the motel and continue to rest. It was a small victory, but one that Sam found no real joy in taking.

Arriving back at their room, Sam could tell that Dean still hadn't slept, at least not more than the usual thirty minute catnap. For four days, Sam watched over his brother, helped put him back together. Although Dean was slowly getting more movement in his shoulder, and the fact that he was back to gobbling down cheeseburgers like they were going out of style, the one thing that hadn't returned to normal was his sleeping.

Despite the less gaunt look to his face, Dean's eyes still had the reddened, haunted look of someone that had gone far too long without deep, restful sleep. In all, Sam didn't think his brother had closed his eyes for more than six or seven hours total since he rescued him from the horrid conditions at Harrisburg. He knew that Dean couldn't keep this up much longer and that all the physical healing that was taking place would soon be lost to sleep deprivation.

Plopping down on the nearest bed, Sam decided that enough was enough.

"Dean, you can't keep this up," he began.

"What's that Sam?" Dean answered, feigning ignorance.

"The not sleeping. I know you're just faking it at night, I've caught you sitting up watching infomercials at three a.m. Then you sit here all day, either watching more

TV or pretending to surf on the laptop. You got to sleep dude. You're never gonna get yourself back in shape if you don't rest."

Dean sighed, knowing the lecture was coming, but hoping that Sam would have let it be just a little while longer. "I just can't Sam," he replied softly. "Every time I close my eyes... well, I'm just afraid of what will be there."

"Dean, you've never told me what happened at Harrisburg. And before you blow me off, I know that Vogler was a sadistic sonofabitch, but I can't even begin to help you if you don't tell me what he did," Sam insisted.

Dean sighed again, lying back on the bed so that his face was staring upward and away from Sam. He didn't know where to begin. The nightmares, the Alp, the utter feeling of hopelessness, it was all surreal, and yet he wondered if it was truly the drugs or just his own mind that had dredged up all the twisted, painful memories.

"Dean?"

"Vogler was an Alp, Sam. He was preying on his patients' worst nightmares, inducing them, feeding off them. There were times when I can remember him there, standing over me, gloating, but then I'd slip down this dark tunnel and some new nightmare would start all over again," Dean began.

Sam remained quiet, watching as Dean threw his left arm across his face and knowing that his brother was fighting hard to maintain the façade that he could deal with this as he had with every other horrible thing in his life.

"Every single nightmare was of something that actually happened, like a memory, but all messed up. And every single time, someone died and I couldn't do anything to stop it. Over and over again, I just stood there while you or Dad, Kyle, even Haley and Ben, you were all killed right before my eyes and I just watched."

"Dean, he had you drugged and restrained. It was just your mind incorporating all that into feeling helpless. Its not uncommon," Sam tried to explain.

"No, no Sammy, it wasn't just that. Towards the end, it was Dad, from back at the cabin that night. He was possessed again and he kept telling me how worthless I was, how I messed everything up. And then he was there at the hangar in New Jersey, with you and me. You were dying and he hated me so much for letting it happen. You hated me for taking you away from Stanford and the life you could've had..." Dean's voice tapered off.

Sam got up and moved over to the other side of the bed. He wanted to reach out and tell his brother that it was all going to be okay, but he knew that the demon's hurtful words that night in the cabin had haunted Dean nearly every day. He also reluctantly admitted that his own recent toying with leaving it all and heading back to college had wounded his brother nearly as much as it had the first time over five years ago.

"I could never hate you, Dean. You're my brother. Everything I am, I pretty much owe to you. And Dad doesn't hate you either, he never could. I know he doesn't have a clue how to show it, but I know that there's nothing he wouldn't do for either one of us."

"It was just all so real, Sam. And I didn't know, couldn't tell anymore, what had actually happened and what was just a dream. Even at the end, I was back at Haris' compound. He was killing those girls when I wouldn't give him the amulet. When I woke up, it was like Haris was there, standing over me still, laughing." Dean admitted. "Even at the hangar, when you... when you died in my arms, Haris was there again, watching, laughing."

"Dean, that's normal. We've been chasing after that bastard all our lives. You were bound to dredge up memories of him."

"No Sammy. It was different. It was like he was there even when I was awake. I mean, before, when I'd come around, Vogler would be standing there, all black-eyed and ready to send me back to LaLa Land with another syringe full of that crap. But at the end, it was all Haris. It was him I saw with the syringe. I dunno, maybe you're right. I guess that's just my weird head for ya," Dean chuckled.

When Sam didn't respond, Dean lowered his arm and rolled over slightly to look at his brother. Sam's face was a mask of near-panic, his eyes wide as though Dean had just said something horribly wrong.

"Sammy? What is it?" Dean asked cautiously.

Sam sucked in a deep breath, both afraid of telling Dean what he'd found in Vogler's office as well as fearful of the implication of the news.

"Dean, I found Vogler's body in his office the morning I found you. His body was, well, it was crushed, damn near to dust. Not a bone in it was still intact. He'd been dead for a while, long before I got to you. And Dean, there was sulfur everywhere," Sam started. "If he was an Alp, then whatever killed him was pretty damn powerful."

Dean rose up on the bed, unable to hide the fear in his eyes as he stared at his brother. "I didn't dream Haris did I?" he asked quietly, his voice barely a whisper.

Sam shook his head silently, meeting his brother's eyes as realization struck them both.

The yellow-eyed demon was back! Haris was free!

The End